

A River Trip in 1833

[The following glimpses of travel on the Upper Mississippi are reprinted from *The Rambler in North America*, Vol. II, pp. 266-314, written by the Englishman, Charles Joseph Latrobe, who travelled extensively in America in 1832 and 1833, and who here describes a trip from Fort Crawford to Fort Snelling and back in the fall of the latter year.—THE EDITOR]

Two hours before sun-set, you may imagine us fairly packed and afloat; our lading consisting of eight men, one woman and child, to whom we gave passage for some distance, and our three selves — in all twelve adults, besides blankets, buffalo-skins, arms, and provisions for twelve days. At the village, whence we made our final start, a scene of hugging and kissing took place between divers of our paddlers and their cousins and friends of both sexes; and *Bon voyage! Bon voyage!* was echoed from the shore, as pushing into the stream, the eight paddles were plunged simultaneously into the water, and we began to stem the current. At the same instant, according to custom, the leader commenced screaming with a singularly tremulous voice, one of the innumerable boat-songs with which the Canadian *voyageurs* of the Upper Lakes and rivers, beguile their long and monotonous labours. The burden was taken up and repeated by his comrades.

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Our purpose this evening was merely to get fairly afloat; and accordingly, after having paddled a few miles, we encamped upon an island in the river, a little below the Painted Rocks, with a dry starlight night as a good omen over our heads; lulled by the howling of the Indians encamped in the vicinity, the barking of dogs, and other sounds which betokened that we had not yet passed out of the bounds of the farms on the Prairie. It was computed that unless prevented by unforeseen accidents, we ought to reach the Falls in six days. The whole of this time was however taken up in advancing as far as Lake Pepin, one hundred and seventy miles above the Prairie, and nearly four more were necessary for the attainment of our object. To give you the outline of our excursion at once, I will mention, that we paddled forward by day, and nightly sought some snug corner of the forest, either on the main or in the islands,—pitched our tent, raised our fire, cooked supper, sang, conversed, and looked at the stars till we were sleepy, and then betook ourselves to our buffalo-robe couch till dawn.

The whole distance to Lake Pepin, the mighty river flows through a deep valley of perhaps two miles average breadth, among innumerable islands, and under steep bluffs which rise frequently on both sides, with precipitous fronts to the height of five hundred feet. Their lower slopes near the river are mostly clothed in oak forest, and many of the summits terminated by a picturesque pile of highly-

coloured rock, of eighty feet or upwards perpendicular. Above and beyond this great channel hollowed out in the country for the passage of the "Father of Waters," the country on both sides seems to be rolling prairie.

The beauty of the scenery,— though only the last colouring of autumn lingered on the forests and prairies,— quite took us by surprise; and nothing can be more opposite than the impressions suggested by the scenery of the Mississippi above and the Mississippi below its junction with the Missouri — here a scene of beauty and romance, there a terribly monotonous turbid and swollen stream. . . .

Our progress for the first few days was far from being what we had expected. The canoe, liable to injury at all times from its extremely fragile nature, being merely a light framework, covered with birch bark, and held together by cross splints, and to be broken and snagged by running foul of objects in the shallows, or to be strained by the great weight which it carried, and still more by any accident in its daily conveyance to and from the shore on the backs of the men,— stood in need of constant repair.

Besides, we soon found that most, if not all our *Crapauds*, as these French Canadians are jocularly called, were in league with the boat to keep us as long on the road as possible. First, because they were rogues all. They had been born without consciences and never had had the chance of acquiring

them since. Secondly, because they were paid by the day, and we were bound to feed them as long as they were in our service. Thirdly, because they saw that we were honest gentlemen, travelling for amusement and instruction — novices in the arts of the *voyageurs*, and of very different habits from the hard-grinding traders whom they usually served, who portioned out their food to them by the square inch — keeping their wages back, if they did not do their duty. You will own that here was a little too much temptation thrown in the way of men who professed no further morality than would be of very easy carriage among the savages by whom they were surrounded, and no religion beyond Indian religion.

Demaret acted as pilot, and plied the stern-paddle, as the boat was his. He had made it with his own hands, and all his life had been a *voyageur*. His qualifications and the natural turn he had for this kind of life were so marked, that we found his very companions used to twit him with having “been born with a piece of birch-bark in his hand.” He looked like no class of human beings I ever saw, and his countenance, which was chiefly marked by the width of his mouth, bore signs of both Spanish and Indian blood. When he sang, he sang like a fox with his tail in a trap.

Garde-Pied, an old Canadian, was our bowman. Then mention we Guillaume, fat and handsome — the *farceur* of the party — the best singer, and, I believe in fact the greatest rogue amongst us, and

the one who both set the roguery agoing and sustained it. Alexandre, Rousseau, and Henri, were common-place rogues — that is to say, they would be honest, if other people would be honest too. Pascal, a mulatto, held about the same tenets, though, I recollect, he had a fragment of a conscience; and, in mentioning old Julian, a Neapolitan by birth, who had been taken by the British — incorporated with the Anglo-Swiss Regiment de Meuron — seen service in India and subsequently in Canada, — where he had been discharged, and had turned Crapaud in his old age — I may say that he was the best, the most sober and most obliging man in the party, and the only one in whom real confidence could be placed.

For the rest, they were all men who would dance from night to morning at a Gombo-ball — sing profane or pastoral French songs hour after hour on the water, — drink and smoke, — cheat their creditors, — live for months in the woods, — work like slaves without grumbling, when they could not help it, — swim like otters, — maintain their French gaiety of character on most occasions, but grumble incessantly when they had nothing to grumble about. They would feed like so many hungry wolves as long as there was anything to eat, knowing no medium; and then bear the pinch of hunger with the stoicism of the Indian with whom most of them had associated from infancy.

They measured their way, not by miles, nor leagues, but by pipes; and would say, — such a point

is so many pipes distant. They generally sang in their peculiar way for half an hour after a halt, solo and chorus, winding up with an Indian yell, or the exclamation, "*Hop! Hop! Sauvons-nous!*" and would then continue silently paddling with their short quick stroke, all following the time indicated by the bowman, till the pipe was out, or till they were tired; when at a signal, they would throw their paddles across the boat, give them a roll to clear the blade of the water, and then rest for a few minutes.

A compartment in the centre of the canoe in which our buffalo-ropes and mats were commodiously arranged, was our ordinary couch. Here we lay in luxurious ease, reading, and chatting hour after hour.

The first certain light which broke in upon us as to the real character of the strange race with whom we had to do,—though the singular conduct which we had remarked in them at the Prairie below, had given us warning,—was early on the sixth day, when approaching a lonely trading-house, near the remarkable mountain called "*La Montagne qui se trèmpe à l'eau,*" scarce a hundred miles on our way; when their long faces, shrugs, and significant gestures gave token that something was wrong. In effect we found that this devouring squad had,—unaided by us, as we had lived principally on water-fowl,—actually in the course of six days, made away with the whole of the provisions laid in with more than usual liberality for twelve days' consumption!

Upwards of a hundred pounds of bacon, besides bread and potatoes and beans in six days! Think of that! We had, to be sure, noticed that they had brought with them a curiously shaped iron pot; originally, perhaps, a foot in depth; but which, having had the original bottom burnt out, had been furnished by some frontier tinker with a fresh one of such form and dimensions as gave the renovated vessel an added profundity of six or eight inches more. We had observed that this marvelous bowl was always piled up to the very edge with provisions: and that frequently when it was simmering and bubbling over the fire in the camp, our rogues would stand round shrouding it from too close observation. If one or another of us approached, one or two of the Crapauds would turn to us with an air of perfect famine and of the greatest tribulation — and ejaculate, “*grande misère!*” or, “*il fait froid icit!*” — giving us to understand, that while we considered our common position as one full of amusement, they deemed it to be one of uncommon trial.

Moreover, we were sometimes awakened hours after supper, when all had appeared to retire to rest for the night, it might be about one in the morning, by loud talking and joyous sounds; and peeping forth, we might see that these unhappy mortals were as brisk as lions; sitting about the fire; passing the joke from one to another; — by the help of long sharply pointed sticks, fishing up meat from the depths of that fathomless pot; and making a very

hearty meal, for which, as to our certain knowledge, a hearty supper preceded it, and a no less hearty breakfast followed it at dawn — we had unfortunately no name in our vocabulary. Still, though it might cross our minds that they were a little lavish of the provisions, yet we never dreamed of a famine before we should reach Fort Snelling. However, there was now no doubt about it, and it was in vain to murmur; and here at the last trading post we had still to lay in fresh stock.

Their songs were very interesting to us, in spite of the horrible French in which they were couched, and the nonsense they contained; as we detected in them many signs of their origin on the plains and in the vineyards of *La belle France*, though now loaded with allusions to the peculiar scenery, manners, and circumstances of the country to which they had been transplanted. In many there was an air of Arcadian and pastoral simplicity which was almost touching at the same time that we knew that the singers had no simplicity about them, and that their character was much more that of the wolf than of the sheep. The airs were not unfrequently truly melodious, and all were characteristic, and chimed in well with our position.

I may elsewhere have given you sundry assurances of the *delights* of Indian Encampments in the forests. From the pleasant idea that these may have conveyed I would take nothing. They are

many and great; and far advanced as the season was, we were yet alive to them for a month to come, even in weather that might be deemed inclement elsewhere. Lest, however, you should accuse me of a disposition to paint every thing "*couleur de rose*," and to throw dust both in my own eyes and those of my neighbours — here follows a page of *miseries*. I remember one camp, which we called "Cross Camp," from the circumstance of all going wrong. It was, I believe, the second in this excursion. The weather had not yet become fairly settled. We had got entangled among the low islands, and not meeting with a place to our liking, as the evening was closing in raw and gusty, we had been obliged to betake ourselves to a shore covered with trees and jungle and make our nest just where we should have wished to have avoided doing so.

It was a confined situation, among thickets of towering dry grass and brushwood. The canoe was unloaded, and was hauled ashore; and the Crapauds as usual made preparations for their fire, ten or twenty yards from that of our trio. The difficulty of fixing the tent which we carried with us, in such a direction that we should be free from smoke, was considerable, as the wind came down on the river in flaws, and no one could decide from what quarter. Time had been lost in seeking a good camping-ground, and the twilight fell on us before all was in order for the night. The tent had been pitched in the midst of opposing opinions: — when suddenly the cry of fire was raised. We saw the wind scat-

tering the embers among the brushwood, and all hands were necessary to put out the flames, which, had they got a-head, would have burnt the canoe in the first place, and singed us out of our hole in the next. By beating them down with our coats and blankets, this was effected; and having broken down the brush on all sides, we returned to our labours near the fires. Every thing was mislaid, having been chucked out of the way of danger in the hurry—the axe was not to be found, and to collect the various articles necessary for our nightly accommodation and entertainment, was a work of time and patience. Of the former, we had plenty; of the latter but little, in the night in question.

Then came a terrific gust from the overhanging bluffs, and we found that the tree under which we had carefully pitched the tent, was rotten at heart, and gave decided tokens of a probable fall. The idea was not a pleasant one. All went wrong. We had not yet decided upon making use of the Cra-pauds as our cooks.—“Nothing easier,” exclaimed I, “than to boil the coffee.”—“Nothing easier,” observed Pourtales, “than to make a handsome fry of potatoes, and to roast a couple of wild ducks in the French style, with a savoury waistcoat of lard!” “Nothing easier than to make a beef-steak!”—said M’Euen! So to work we went, each in his own way, and following his own device, while he snarled at that of his neighbour. “Nothing easier than to find fault with what one does not understand!” thought each and every one of us.

Well, the coffee was on the fire and “progressing” — the process necessary for its perfection being after all the most simple of those under trial; — the potatoes were washed, peeled, and sliced; — the beef-steaks, skewered on long sticks, were bent towards the embers; — the mallards were plucked, drawn, and spitted — how, may not be said, — but exposed to the hot smoke and flame their waistcoats were kept in a constant flare and frizzle. Basting was out of the question, except with cold water; and the office of dredging-box was performed by the frequent gust, which covered them and the beef-steaks and the sliced potatoes with snow-white ashes.

Now imagine the consequences of being all cross, and overwhelmed with misfortunes — the miseries of cooking and camping on a windy night — difference of opinion — smoke in the eyes — fire at the finger ends — shakes — overturns — wet logs — mistakes — and bitterness of spirit!

No sooner have you got matters into something like order, but the wind veers a point or two, and the smoke which had hitherto sailed off sideways from your tent, leaving your night quarters warm and smokeless, as it always ought, is now driven directly against it, and you have no alternative, but either to bear the reverse, or to strike and pitch it anew.

You hang your coat, or blanket, or buffalo robe, — which may have been soaked by being undermost in the leaking canoe, — on a forked stick to dry, placing it to the windward of the fire, to keep it out of the

smoke and sparks; — and next time you look at it, you see it singeing among the glowing embers, into which possibly a careless friend, or more probably the wind, has precipitated it. In utter despair you collect a number of very indispensable articles, such as straps and ropes, not to be replaced; — and you go hang them carefully to a distant sapling, far away from the ordinary passage; — when you next look for them you see that some kind friend has by chance cut the tree down in the dark, and consigned it and its charge to the flames. You go valourously forth to cut a tent-pole or another log for the fire, — and, not having the true backwoodsman's fling with the axe, come hopping back in five minutes with a neat chip in your shin.

Jaded and gloomy, while the supper is cooking, you lie down with a book in your hand, say for example, "Burton on Melancholy," which by the by, was the only work, beside a Bible, that we had with us. You stretch yourself on your blanket in your corner of the tent, but find that besides lying on an unfortunate slope which makes your heels rise higher than your head, there is under you a stubborn knot of hard wood, which no coaxing of yours can extract, and which nothing but a complete turn out, and a forcible application of the axe, will rid you of: and so forth! But all these are trifles to the miseries of carrying on a partnership in cooking in a dark windy night.

You advance to shift your burning supper to a

safer place,— are maddened by the puff of pungent smoke that fills your eyes — start back,— tread on some long crooked branch, one end of which extends into the darkness and the other props the coffee-pot, when to your extreme surprise and the undisguised wrath of the superintendent of that particular branch of the duty, the vessel makes a jump into the air and overturns its contents into the tasty dish of potatoes frizzling below. Then follows a scene of objurgation, recrimination, and protestation.

But, *n'importe* — the coffee is replaced — the beef-steaks get thoroughly burned on one side; — the ducks are pronounced to be cooked because the waistcoat is reduced to a perfect cinder, and because the birds insist upon taking fire. The “medicine-chest,” as we called our store box, is brought out, and preparations for a meal seriously attempted. It is soon found that notwithstanding all losses and mischances there are still two things left, appetite and abundance; and though nothing perhaps is done with real gastronomic nicety, yet after a day spent in the open air, every thing has a relish which no sauce could give. As you have doubtless experienced, nothing predisposes to complacent good humour so much as a satisfied appetite, and by the time supper is ended, and the moon has risen, and the bright embers free from smoke are glowing in the wind,— you are ready to laugh together at every petty vexation. However, we learned wisdom at the “Cross Camp,” and forthwith hired Rousseau to

look to our cooking at his own fire — keeping possession of the coffee-pot alone, and henceforth our “*miseries*” were very sensibly diminished. . . .

Towards evening we descried the long looked-for Fort with its towers and imposing extent of wall crowning the high angular bluff at whose base the upper branch of the St. Peters enters the Mississippi; and paddling swiftly up the lower channel, a large triangular island separating the two,—we landed and were most hospitably received by the officers on duty. We were forthwith furnished with quarters in the Fort above, while the Crapauds pitched a tent under the shadow of the bluff by the water’s edge, got their canoe on shore, and set their enormous pot a boiling forthwith. I believe they never saw the bottom of it, nor suffered it to cool during the whole week of their stay. They did not forget whenever we visited them to talk a great deal about “*misère*”; at the same time that they had nothing to do but what they loved best,—eat and sleep. They are a singular race, half Indian, half French, with a dash of the prairie wolf.

Meanwhile we had been admitted to full participation in the rites of hospitality within the Fort, and were furnished with every needful accommodation. We spread our buffalo skins and blankets in an occupied apartment, and slept in quiet; not forgetting however in the course of the evening to ascend one of the bastions, and listen to the roar of the

Great Falls rising on the night air at a distance of seven miles. . . .

But we must turn our faces southward, for the Indian summer is past—the lagging files of the water fowl are scudding before the wind, and another week may curb the mighty Mississippi with a bridle of ice.—Another week in fact did so, but ere that, paddle, current, and sail had carried us far on our way south, as you may now hear.

Our intercourse with the inhabitants of Fort Snelling only strengthened that feeling of good will which will always make me happy to meet an officer of the United States' army.

The signal was given—the Crapauds, who had had all their time to themselves, packed up their big kettle with many a shrug and exclamation of "*misère,*" grasped their paddles, paid their compliments to their chums ashore, and betook themselves to their songs and their pipes.

In returning, both wind and current favoured us so far, that by the evening of the second day we reached Lake Pepin, across the upper part of which we careered before a strong north wind in a most marvellous fashion, under a broad blanket, double-reefed. A large flight of snow-white swans rose from a shallow cove just as we entered it, and, startled by our approach, hastened with their trumpet voice and broad vans flapping to the southward. We passed the Cape; and then stood over for the

Cap à la fille, which rose with its neighbour prominently in figure and height from the long line of steep bluffs forming the eastern boundary.

As we looked forth from the summit early in the morning, across the troubled surface of the lake, of which it commands a wide view; a dense column of smoke from the opposite side gave us intimation that the Prairies were on fire. The spread of the conflagration on the low grounds directly opposite, which drew our attention at intervals during the day, continued unabated; and as evening approached, other columns of smoke springing up in all directions, both on the summit of the opposite range of mountains and in the vallies at their feet, showed us that the Indians had taken advantage of the driving wind to fire the country for a great many miles inland. The scene which presented itself from the summit of the rock on the south side of our dell, when the sun, which had been hidden all day, just before setting, peered out windy and red, between long bars of cloud in the southwest — and from that time till long after dark, was one of the most sublime and extraordinary you can conceive, and a great contrast to the repose which reigned in the sheltered glen at our feet, where glistened our little tent and fires, and where the men might be seen lying under the shade of the canoe.

On the opposite side of the troubled sheet of water in the middle ground, over which the rock impended,

the range of western bluffs was seen to incline inland, behind the *Pointe aux Sables*, leaving a wide tract of country, partly forest and partly prairie, between their foot and the shore. A singularly conical and prominent hill rose abruptly from the middle of this plain. Around this detached eminence, which, swathed as it was in the smoke of the burning prairies beyond, seemed like a volcano, the fire had been concentrating itself during the earlier hours of the day, now advancing in one direction till checked by a dense tract of forest or a river, and then rushing on in another and rolling over the summit or the base of the mountains. At sunset, the flame seemed to have gathered full strength, and to have reached a long tract of level grassy prairie nearer the shore, upon which it then swiftly advanced, leaving a black path in its trail. Here we saw a bright red line, a couple of miles in range, advancing majestically over the wide prairie. In one place the progress of the fire, effectually checked by a small river opposite, died away or edged over the country with slower progress. In another, after being seemingly choked, it would burst forth with redoubled fury, sending bright jets of flame far on the wind. There again the light-blue smoke was suddenly changed to dark brown, as the conflagration burst upon a mass of grosser materials for destruction than the dry grass of the prairie. We calculated at this time that the fire spread over a tract of nearly twelve miles in length, while the dis-

tant glare upon the clouded horizon showed that it was raging far inland. The whole evening, the lake, the Maiden's Rock, the clouds, and the recesses of the glen, were illuminated by the flames, while, gaining the rank growth on the border of the lake and the brow of the distant mountains, the country opposite blazed like tinder in the wind; and from the summit of the Maiden's Rock, which we again ascended before we retired to rest — the scene was fearfully grand. It is difficult to calculate the advance of the flames on the dry level prairie, in the van of a strong and steady wind, but we should think it was at least eight miles per hour. . . .

Our encampment in the forests, near the Bad Axe, on the night between the 12th and 13th of November, was rendered remarkable by one circumstance.

The night was calm; the wind, which had been northerly the foregoing day, chopped about early in the morning to the south, and blew with some force with a clear sky. Early, it might be between two and three o'clock, the whole heavens became gradually covered with falling stars, increasing in number till the sky had the appearance of being filled with luminous flakes of snow. This meteoric rain continued to pour down till the light of the coming day rendered it invisible. Millions must have shone and disappeared during the course of these three or four hours. They appeared to proceed from a point in the heavens, about fourteen degrees to the south-

east of the zenith, and thence fell in curved lines to every point of the compass. Whether they remained visible down to the horizon or not, we do not know. There were some in the shower of larger size than the others, but for the greater part, they appeared as stars of the first or second magnitude. Their course in falling was interrupted, like the luminous flight of the fire fly. . . . We were fortunate, you may suppose, in enjoying for hours such a splendid and uncommon phenomenon, streaming over the river, and forests, and bluffs. Fortunate — yes, truly! what will you say, when I own that though all I have related is strictly true, not one of us saw it — having been permitted to remain prosaically sleeping within the shelter of our tent till all was over. Our Crapauds, it is true, were up and awake, and could not but notice the extraordinary appearance of the heavens, but before them hung their fathomless kettle filled to the brim; and they sat watching it simmering on the blazing logs with a philosophical insensibility to every thing else, which was extremely characteristic, though to us perfectly unaccountable. What was it to them if the stars fell from heaven, or the skies “drizzled blood?” — that there was that passing over their heads which would make the very wolves of the forest howl as their eyes glared upwards, or urge the Indian to kneel and pray to the Great Spirit — as long as their beloved camp-kettle was unmoved, and the whiskey-keg lay undisturbed in its bed in the tangled grass, what was that to them?

As we descended the river, we found the attention of all excited by the phenomenon, and we alone, reposing in the open air, in the best possible position for observation, were not witnesses of it!

Early on the evening of this day, we returned, blithely singing our *Chanson de retour*, down the river, to the little village of Prairie de Chien, where a knot of wives, daughters, and children, awaited the return of our men; and after a few moments spent by them in the ordinary compliments, kissing, and embraces, we were conducted to the landing of the Fort, and there welcomed as old friends.