

In Quest of a True Source

When Beltrami debarked from the *Virginia* on May 10th he found a letter from Countess Compagnoni had already reached Fort St. Peter—now Fort Snelling. He was not slow in setting down his impressions of the significance of the arrival of the *Virginia* or the wonder and fear instilled in the "savages" who lined the shore:

I know not what impression the first sight of the Phoenician vessels might make on the inhabitants of the coasts of Greece; or the Triremi of the Romans on the wild natives of Iberia, Gaul, or Britain; but I am sure it could not be stronger than that which I saw on the countenances of these savages at the arrival of our steam-boat.

When they saw it cut its way without oars or sails against the current of the great river, some thought it a monster vomiting fire, others the dwelling of the Manitous, but all approached it with reverence or fear.

All the persons on board were in their eyes something more than human. Major Tagliawar, the agent, was astonished at the extraordinary marks of respect with which he was received. The Indians thought he was in the company of spirits;—it matters little whether they took us for gods or devils, for savages pay equal reverence to both; nay, they pray more to the evil spirits than to the good; for, say they, the latter, who are perfectly good, can do only good, but we must take great care not to offend the wicked, that they may do us no harm. If this is not ortho-

dox, it shews at least that the savages are not bad logicians.

Beltrami spent several exciting weeks at Fort Snelling visiting with the soldiers and officers. He especially enjoyed his intimate contacts with the various tribes of the Sioux Nation who had gathered there, and who had witnessed the advent of the *Virginia*. His entire waking moments were given over to conversing with the headmen and chiefs, attending the ceremonies, and learning of their customs. Since he was held in veneration for two things—because he was an Italian (a new race for the Indians) and because he had arrived in a fire canoe—Beltrami made the most of his situation and succeeded in wheedling a number of prized trophies from the redmen.

Beltrami's cup was filled to overflowing when he had the "good luck" to witness the arrival of an "extraordinary flotilla" of Chippewa Indians who promptly began negotiations with Major Taliaferro. The life, customs, and beliefs of these irreconcilable enemies of the Sioux were described in two successive letters by Beltrami to his "dear Countess."

But Beltrami's burning desire, once Fort Snelling had been reached, was to explore the St. Peter's, or Minnesota River, "which has never yet been explored, the sources of which are occupied by the most wild and powerful tribes of the *Sioux*, and as yet only vaguely defined; while the sur-

rounding territory abounds in buffaloes . . . It was my intention to proceed towards the sources of the Mississippi, which are still absolutely unknown . . . and which was always before my eyes."

Since Major Taliaferro was unable to go, Beltrami joined the exploring party of Major Stephen H. Long, whose destination was the headwaters of the St. Peter's, the Red River of the North, and Pembina. The arrangement with Major Long was not a happy one although it did allow Beltrami to continue chronicling the life of the Indians and fur traders. At Pembina, after more difficulties with the Major, Beltrami passed near the 49° parallel and then proceeded in a southeasterly direction to the headwaters of the Mississippi.

Beltrami fixed the source of the Mississippi in what he called "Lake Julia; and the sources of the two rivers, *the Julian sources of Bloody [Red] river*, and *the Julian sources of the Mississippi*, which, in the Algonquin language, means *the Father of Rivers*." The area Beltrami associated with the headwaters of the Mississippi can best be seen on modern maps as Lower Red Lake, Turtle Lake, and Red Cedar or Cass Lake. It is, unfortunately, not the accepted source of the Mississippi, which Henry Rowe Schoolcraft placed in Lake Itasca in 1832.

The hardships and dangers Beltrami underwent between Pembina and Cass Lake were many and sometimes exasperating. As Taliaferro relates:

His sufferings were of no agreeable nature. Here, near Leech lake, he fell in with a sub-chief, the 'Cloudy Weather,' most fortunately, who knew Mr. B., having seen him in one of my councils at the agency. The old man was given by signs, to know that white man wanted to descend the river. The chief took our Italian friend in his canoe, and turned down stream. Indians are proverbially slow, hunting and fishing on the way; Beltrami lost all patience—abused his Indian crew,—made many menaces, etc. The 'Cloud' tapped him on the hat with his pipe stem, as much as to say 'I will take you to my father safe if you will be still.' The old chief told of this temper of my friend, but Mr. B. never made allusion to it, but was very grateful to his kind Pillager friends.

From Cass Lake the indomitable Beltrami paddled down the Mississippi through Leech Lake, Grand Rapids, and Sandy Lake, finally reaching Fort Snelling where his warm reception by Major Taliaferro and the officers at the Fort so touched him that he "could not help shedding tears of gratitude and attachment."

Beltrami left his friends at Fort Snelling in a "decked vessel called a *keel-boat*" on October 3, 1823. He would have preferred crossing what is now Minnesota and Iowa to Fort Council Bluff on the Missouri River but the late season made this impractical. "Though I have in general the greatest aversion to return the way I came, yet the Mississippi has still developed to me new charms. I could, indeed, never restrain my admiration of it. What a beautiful—what a majestic river!"

From St. Louis, which he reached on October 20th, Beltrami headed downstream on the steamboat *Dolphin*, a 144-ton craft built at Pittsburgh in 1820. The mouth of the Ohio, New Madrid, Chickasaw Bluff, and a place called Memphis, an "inconsiderable village" containing "nothing of the ancient, nor the progress of the modern" are mentioned by Beltrami. Continuing downstream past the mouths of the St. Francis, White, and Arkansas rivers, Beltrami recorded Natchez, and a "pleasant little town" called Baton Rouge. Finally New Orleans was reached, a city with a "prodigious population" despite the fact it "may be said to have just emerged from a swamp" and yet appeared like some "grand capital" with its streets "well lighted with reflecting lamps."

When Beltrami reached the mouth of the Mississippi he wrote Countess Compagnoni that it could no longer be doubted that the Mississippi was the "first river in the world."

You have seen that, by facilitating commerce, that inexhaustible source of wealth, it imparts occupation and life to a world.

Finally, you have admired with me its beauty, its opulent mines, its almost always smooth and tranquil course, and the wisdom of nature in its *bayoux* or passes.

Judge now whether another such river can be found on the globe which thus communicates with every sea and at various points, which combines so many wonders with such great utility, which surveys more than one hundred steam-boats gliding over its waters, with an infinite num-

ber of other vessels freighted with the productions and manufacture of both worlds, and to which futurity promises such brilliant destinies. Judge whether the Mississippi be not the first river in the world!

Beltrami received many honors following his exciting pilgrimage through the United States in 1823. A 328-page book entitled *La Decouverte des Sources du Mississippi et de la Riviere Sanglante* was published at New Orleans in 1824. Four years later, in 1828, he published a 2-volume work of 1,093 pages in London entitled *A Pilgrimage in Europe and America, leading to the Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and Bloody River*. It is from the second volume of the latter that the material in this issue of *The Palimpsest* is in large measure taken.

Upon returning to Europe, Beltrami represented France at the Scientific Congress held in Stuttgart in 1834. Shortly afterward he acquired a small landed estate at Heidelberg where he lived for two years. In 1837 he was in Vienna, shortly thereafter in Rome; and finally, after more wanderings, he returned to his property at Filotrano in 1850 to be among friends. There he died in 1855 at the ripe old age of seventy-five.

Giacomo Constantine Beltrami must always be considered as one of Bergamo's most distinguished citizens. That neither his name, nor his daring adventures, have been forgotten is attested by another citizen of Bergamo, who attained world re-

noun in 1958 when he became Pope John XXIII. On one occasion, the story is told, this beloved Roman Pontiff was holding his regular audience for foreign visitors to the Vatican. Noting that one of them hailed from Memphis, Pope John declared he was especially interested in meeting the gentleman from Memphis because that city was located on the mighty Mississippi and a fellow townsman of his from Bergamo had the honor of discovering the source of the Father of Waters. Truly, Beltrami and his American exploits have not been forgotten. And Bergamo itself can be proud of being the birthplace of such outstanding men as Giacomo Constantine Beltrami and Pope John XXIII.

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