

Barging Down from Fort Union

Audubon's trip up the Missouri River aboard the *Omega* in 1843 brought him in close contact with hardy fur-traders, squalid Indians, and wild game by the thousands—the latter being vividly recorded in the adventurous artist's *Journal*. It had taken 49 days to make the trip from St. Louis to Fort Union, stops at various forts and trading posts, and with the turgid, tawny, swiftly flowing Missouri, slowing the progress of the *Omega* upstream.

After hunting in the Fort Union area for specimens of wild game of all kinds, Audubon and his companions prepared to return home before the first cold blasts of winter set in.

In his *Journal* he records:

"*August 16.* Started from Fort Union at 12 M. in the Mackinaw barge *Union*. Shot five young Ducks. Camped at the foot of a high bluff. Good supper of Chickens and Ducks.

"*Saturday, 19th.* Wolves howling, and [buffalo] bulls roaring, just like the long continued roll of a hundred drums. Saw large gangs of Buffaloes walking along the river. Headed Knife River one and a half miles. . . . Abundance of Bear tracks. . . . Herds of Buffaloes on the prairies. . . .

"*Sunday, 20th.* . . . Thousands upon thousands of Buffaloes; the roaring of these animals resembles the grunting of hogs, with a rolling sound from the throat."

A month passed before they approached Iowa-land. Fighting adverse winds, low water, and interminable snags, the cumbersome Mackinaw barge floated slowly downstream. On Saturday, September 23, Audubon noted that they had made "a good run of about sixty miles" and landed at Ponca Island that night, about 150 miles above the mouth of the Big Sioux River.

The following day, on September 24, Audubon recorded "a large flock of White Pelicans." High winds forced them to land just below the Basil River, 125 miles above the Big Sioux. From this point on, Audubon was traveling a course well below the latitude of present-day northern Iowa. In his *Journal* he records:

Monday, 27th. Blowing hard all night, and began raining before day. Cold, wet, and misty. Started at a quarter past ten, passed Bonhomme Island at four, and landed for the night at five, fifteen miles below.

Tuesday, 26th. Cold and cloudy; started early. Shot a Pelican. Passed James River at eleven. Abundance of Wild Geese. Bell killed a young White Pelican. Weather fairer but coldish. Sprague killed a Goose, but it was lost. Camped

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a few miles above the Vermilion River. Harris saw Raccoon tracks on Basil River.

Wednesday, 27th. Cloudy but calm. Many Wood-ducks, and saw Raccoon tracks again this morning. Passed the Vermilion River at half-past seven. My Badger got out of his cage last night, and we had to light a candle to secure it. We reached the Fort of Vermilion at twelve, and met with a kind reception from Mr. Pascal. Previous to this we met a barge going up, owned and commanded by Mr. Tybell, and found our good hunter Michaux. He asked me to take him down, and I promised him \$20 per month to St. Louis. We bought two barrels of superb potatoes, two of corn, and a good fat cow. For the corn and potatoes I paid no less than \$16.00.

Thursday, 28th. A beautiful morning, and we left at eight. The young man who brought me the calf at Fort George has married a squaw, a handsome girl, and she is here with him. Antelopes are found about twenty-five miles from the fort, but not frequently. Landed fifteen miles below on Elk Point. Cut up and salted the cow. Provost and I went hunting and saw three female Elks, but the order was to shoot only bucks; a large one started below us, jumped into the river, and swam across, carrying his horns flat down and spread on each side of his back; the neck looked to me about the size of a flour-barrel. Harris killed a hen Turkey, and Bell and the others saw plenty but did not

shoot, as Elks were the order of the day. I cannot eat beef after being fed on Buffaloes. I am getting an old man, for this evening I missed my footing on getting into the boat, and bruised my knee and my elbow, but at seventy and over [58 years] I cannot have the spring of seventeen.

Friday, 29th. Rained most of the night, and it is raining and blowing at present. Crossed the river and have encamped at the mouth of the Iowa River, the boundary line of the Sioux and Omahas. Harris shot a Wolf. My knee too sore to allow me to walk. Stormy all day.

Saturday, 30th. Hard rain all night, the water rose four inches. Found a new species of large bean in the Wild Turkey. Mosquitoes rather troublesome. The sun shining by eight o'clock, and we hope for a good dry day. Whippoorwills heard last night, and Night-hawks seen flying. Saw a Long-tailed Squirrel that ran on the shore at the cry of our Badger. Michaux had the boat landed to bring on a superb set of Elkhorns that he secured last week. Abundance of Geese and Ducks. Weather clouding over again, and at two we were struck by a heavy gale of wind, and were obliged to land on the weather shore; the wind continued heavy, and the motion of the boat was too much for me, so I slipped on shore and with Michaux made a good camp, where we rolled ourselves in our blankets and slept soundly.

Sunday, October 1. The wind changed, and

lulled before morning, so we left at a quarter past six. The skies looked rather better, nevertheless we had several showers. Passed the [Big] Sioux River at twenty minutes past eleven. Heard a Pileated Woodpecker, and saw Fish Crows. Geese very abundant. Landed below the Sioux River to shoot Turkeys, having seen a large male on the bluffs. Bell killed a hen, and Harris two young birds; these will keep us going some days. Stopped again by the wind opposite Floyd's grave; started again and ran about four miles, when we were obliged to land in a rascally place at twelve o'clock. Had hail and rain at intervals. Camped at the mouth of the Omaha River, six miles from the village. The wild Geese are innumerable. The wind has ceased and stars are shining.

Monday, 2d. Beautiful but cold. The water has risen nine inches, and we travel well. Started early. Stopped at eight by the wind at a vile place, but plenty of Jerusalem artichokes, which we tried and found very good. Started again at three, and made a good run till sundown, when we found a fair camping-place and made our supper from excellent young Geese.

Tuesday, 3d. A beautiful, calm morning; we started early. Saw three Deer on the bank. A Prairie Wolf travelled on the shore beside us for a long time before he found a place to get up on the prairie. Plenty of Sandhill Cranes were seen as we passed the Little Sioux River. Saw three

more Deer, another Wolf, two Swans, several Pelicans, and abundance of Geese and Ducks. Passed Soldier River at two o'clock. We were caught by a snag that scraped and tore us a little. Had we been two feet nearer, it would have ruined our barge. We passed through a very swift cut-off, most difficult of entrance. We have run eighty-two miles and encamped at the mouth of the cut-off, near the old bluffs. Killed two Mallards; the Geese and Ducks are abundant beyond description. Brag, Harris' dog, stole and hid all the meat that had been cooked for our supper.

Wednesday, 4th. Cloudy and coldish. Left early and can't find my pocket knife, which I fear I have lost. We were stopped by the wind at Cabané Bluffs, about twenty miles above Fort Croghan; we all hunted, with only fair results. Saw some hazel bushes and some black walnuts. Wind-bound till night, and nothing done.

Thursday, 5th. Blew hard all night, but a clear and beautiful sunrise. Started early, but stopped by the wind at eight. Bell, Harris, and Squires have started off for Fort Croghan. As there was every appearance of rain we left at three and reached the fort about half-past four. Found all well, and were most kindly received. We were presented with some green corn, and had a quantity of bread made, also bought thirteen eggs from an Indian for twenty-five cents. Honey bees are found here, and do well, but none are seen above

this place. I had an unexpected slide on the bank as it had rained this afternoon; and Squires had also one at twelve in the night, when he and Harris with Sprague came to the boat after having played whist up to that hour.

Friday, 6th. Some rain and thunder last night. A tolerable day. Breakfast at the camp, and left at half-past eight. Our man Michaux was passed over to the officer's boat, to steer them down to Fort Leavenworth, where they are ordered, but we are to keep in company, and he is to cook for us at night. The whole station here is broken up, and Captain Burgwin leaves in a few hours by land with the dragoons, horses, etc. Stopped at Belle Vue at nine, and had a kind reception; bought 6 lbs. coffee, 13 eggs, 2 lbs. butter, and some black pepper. Abundance of Indians, of four different nations. Major Miller, the agent, is a good man for this place. Left again at eleven. A fine day. Passed the Platte and its hundreds of snags, at a quarter past one, and stopped for the men to dine. The stream quite full, and we saw some squaws on the bar, the village was in sight. Killed two Pelican, but only got one. Encamped about thirty miles below Fort Croghan. Lieutenant Carleton supped with us, and we had a rubber of whist.

Saturday, 7th. Fine night, and fine morning. Started too early, while yet dark, and got on a bar. Passed McPherson's the first house in the

State of Missouri, at eight o'clock. Bell skinned the young of *Fringilla harrisi*. Lieutenant Carleton came on board to breakfast with us—a fine companion and a perfect gentleman. Indian war-whoops were heard by him and his men whilst embarking this morning after we left. We encamped at the mouth of Nishnebottana, a fine, clear stream. Went to the house of Mr. Beaumont, who has a pretty wife. We made a fine run of sixty or seventy miles.

Sunday, 8th. Cloudy, started early, and had rain by eight o'clock. Stopped twice by the storm, and played cards to relieve the dulness. Started at noon, and ran till half-past four. The wind blowing hard we stopped at a good place for our encampment. Presented a plate of the quadrupeds to Lieut. James Henry Carleton, and he gave me a fine Black Bear skin, and has promised me a set of Elk horns. Stopped on the east side of the river in the evening. Saw a remarkably large flock of Geese passing southward.

Monday, 9th. Beautiful and calm, started early. Bell shot a Gray Squirrel, which was divided and given to my Fox and my Badger. Squires, Carleton, Harris, Bell, and Sprague walked across the Bend to the Black Snake Hills, killed six Gray Squirrels, four Parrakeets, and two Partridges. Bought butter, eggs, and some whiskey for the men; exchanged knives with the Lieutenant. Started and

ran twelve miles to a good camp on the Indian [West] side.

Tuesday, 10th. Beautiful morning, rather windy; started early. Great flocks of Geese and Pelicans; killed two of the latter. Reached Fort Leavenworth at four, and, as usual everywhere, received most kindly treatment and reception from Major Morton. Lieutenant Carleton gave me the Elk horns. Wrote to John Bachman, Gideon B. Smith, and a long letter home.

Wednesday, 11th. Received a most welcome present of melons, chickens, bread, and butter from the generous major. Lieutenant Carleton came to see me off, and we parted reluctantly. Left at half-past six; weather calm and beautiful. Game scarce, paw-paws plentiful. Stopped at Madame Chouteau's, where I bought three pumpkins. Stopped at Liberty Landing and delivered the letters of Laidlow to Black Harris. Reached Independence Landing at sundown; have run sixty miles. Found no letters. Steamer "Lebanon" passed upwards at half-past eight.

Thursday, 12th. Beautiful and calm; stopped and bought eggs, etc., at a Mr. Shivers', from Kentucky. Ran well to Lexington, where we again stopped for provisions; ran sixty miles today.

Friday, 13th. Heavy white frost, and very foggy. Started early and ran well. Tried to buy butter at several places, but in vain. At Greenville bought coffee. Abundance of Geese and White Pelicans;

many Sandhill Cranes. Harris killed a Woodduck. Passed Grand River; stopped at New Brunswick, where we bought excellent beef at $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents a pound, but very inferior to Buffalo. Camped at a deserted woodyard, after running between sixty and seventy miles.

Saturday, 14th. A windy night, and after eight days' good run, I fear we shall be delayed to-day. Stopped by a high wind at twelve o'clock. We ran ashore, and I undertook to push the boat afloat, and undressing for the purpose got so deep in the mud that I had to spend a much longer time than I desired in very cold water. Visited two farm houses, and bought chickens, eggs, and butter. Very little of this last. At one place we procured corn bread. The squatter visited our boat, and we camped near him. He seemed a good man; was from North Carolina, and had a fine family. Michaux killed two Hutchins' Geese, the first I ever saw in the flesh. Ran about twenty miles; steamer "Lebanon" passed us going downwards, one hour before sunset. Turkeys and Long-tailed Squirrels very abundant.

Sunday, 15th. Cold, foggy and cloudy; started early. Passed Chariton River and village, and Glasgow; bought bread, and oats for my Deer. Abundance of Geese and Ducks. Passed Arrow Rock at eleven. Passed Boonesville, the finest country on this river; Rocheport, with high, rocky

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cliffs; six miles below which we encamped, having run sixty miles.

Monday, 16th. Beautiful autumnal morning, a heavy white frost and no wind. Started early, before six. The current very strong. Passed Nashville, Marion, and steamer "Lexington" going up. Jefferson City at twelve. Passed the Osage River and saw twenty-four Deer opposite Smith Landing; camped at sundown, and found Giraud, the "strong man." Ran sixty-one miles. Met the steamer "Satan," badly steered. Abundance of Geese and Ducks everywhere.

Tuesday, 17th. Calm and very foggy. Started early and floated a good deal with the strong current. Saw two Deer. The fog cleared off by nine o'clock. Passed the Gasconade River at half-past nine. Landed at Pinckney to buy bread, etc. Buffaloes have been seen mired, and unable to defend themselves, and the Wolves actually eating their noses while they struggled, but were eventually killed by the Wolves. Passed Washington and encamped below it at sundown; a good run.

Wednesday, 18th. Fine and calm; started very early. Passed Mount Pleasant. Landed at St. Charles to purchase bread, etc. Provost became extremely drunk, and went off by land to St. Louis. Passed the Charbonnière River, and encamped about one mile below. The steamer "Tobacco Plant" landed on the shore opposite. Bell and Harris killed a number of Gray Squirrels.

Thursday, 19th. A heavy white frost, foggy, but calm. We started early, the steamer after us. Forced by the fog to stop on a bar, but reached St. Louis at three in the afternoon. Unloaded and sent all the things to Nicholas Berthoud's warehouse. Wrote home.

It will be noted that Audubon reached the mouth of the Big Sioux River on his downstream trip on October 1. It had required 19 days for the *Union* to negotiate the 810 miles from that point to St. Louis—the distance along the western border of Iowa representing only about one-fourth of this mileage. Thus, a scant five days were required to pass the Iowa section of the trip. It might also be noted that the *Omega* had made the run from Fort Union in 17 days, a distance of 1,757 miles, according to the United States Engineers Surveys of 1889-1893.

Three days after his arrival at St. Louis, on October 22, Audubon boarded the steamboat *Nautilus* for Cincinnati. Thence he hurried eastward to his home on the Hudson River. Laconically he records: "Reached home at 3 P.M., November 6th, 1843, and thank God, found all my family quite well."

The Audubon *Journal* is one of the most important records of western Iowa before statehood was achieved in 1846. It is worth noting that a portion of the downstream *Journal*, including the part

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dealing with Iowa, was lost for a half century until discovered by two of Audubon's granddaughters in 1896. Fortunately these were recovered in time to be incorporated in *Audubon and His Journals* by Maria R. Audubon, which was published in two volumes by Scribners in 1897. Elliott Coues was responsible for the zoological and other notes. The present number of *The Palimpsest* is based in large measure on these two volumes.

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