

THE PALIMPSEST

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A Trip to the Bad Lands

I

I had gone to seek my fortune in Saint Louis, the great city of Missouri. In turn a commission merchant, a pedlar, and a mule driver, I was also following the current of emigration toward the promised land of California, when I met an American geologist who was ready to leave that very day for a long exploring trip through the American continent. I obtained permission to accompany him as artist. I was granted two hours in which to prepare myself for the trip, that is to say, to buy a pair of buckskin breeches, two flannel shirts, a revolver and a gun; and I started out on the steamboat *Iowa*

[This account of the experiences of a French artist, E. de Girardin, who accompanied a geological expedition into the Black Hills and the Bad Lands of Nebraska Territory during the summer of 1849, is reprinted from a longer article in a French travel magazine, *Le Tour du Monde*, 1864, pp. 49-64. The translation, which follows the original very closely, was made by Miss Elizabeth Conrad.—THE EDITOR]

in the midst of such turmoil and noise as was deafening. The friends of the passengers overwhelmed us with a hail of oranges and shouts of enthusiastic good-bye; the officers were beating the drunken sailors and the crowd was quarreling and swearing in every language of the old and new world, to the accompaniment of the whistling of our steamboat and the roaring of our powerful engines as the smoke enveloped us in a thick cloud.

It is well known that American *steamboats* do not resemble in the slightest the frail craft of our rivers. These are immense structures three stories high surmounted by tall chimneys; they are really caravansaries where the traveller finds all the luxury and comfort of a first-class hotel. In fact a Saint Louis woman, wishing to give a high idea of a house furnished and decorated with great luxury, said: "It is almost as elegant as a steamboat!"

We were about two hundred passengers, mostly steerage passengers, poor adventurers engaged for a year with the American Company, which trades in furs from the Far West. There were types from every country in the world; bearded Parisians, some political victims, and others deserters from the colony of Cabet; Danes, Germans, Spaniards, English, Irish, negroes, mulattoes, Indians, and half-breeds. The most numerous, however, were Canadians. Endowed with iron constitutions, used to travel and dangers, these are excellent hunters and indefatigable seekers after adventure.

In the cabin, we had three geologists, a botanist, two officers from the American army, and a young German prince with his staff. The Indian race was represented by two women, pure blooded savages. The one, a daughter of a Black Foot chief, and married to a director of the Fur Company, is well known in the upper Missouri region because of the happy influence which she exercises there.

Only at the moment of leaving do I learn the destination of the *Iowa*. This boat, belonging to the American Company, makes each year one trip to the upper Missouri, stopping at different trading posts situated on the river, and leaving there the newly employed men, provisions and merchandise.

It is a long trip of forty days to go up stream to Fort Union, an establishment situated at the confluence of the Yellowstone, six hundred and seventy-five leagues from Saint Louis and eleven hundred from New Orleans. However, since steamboats of heavy tonnage can, during four or five months of the year, go up as far as Fort Benton, situated in the land of the Black Feet and ten leagues from the great falls of the Missouri, one may say that the great river is navigable for twelve hundred and sixteen leagues.

Going with difficulty up stream against a current of from four to five kilometers an hour, we pass in front of the slopes of Gasconade, remarkable for their beautiful cliffs covered with verdure; then come Jefferson City, the capital of Missouri, and

Independence where the Mormons in their hegira had established their new Zion, and from which they were driven by the Missourians.

To-day this little town is filled with emigrants on their way to California, and a steam *ferryboat* continually crosses the river, transporting from one shore to the other a great number of wagons, many herds of cattle and horses, as well as thousands of emigrants, men, women and children.

After a period of interruption caused by many deceptions, a new epidemic of gold fever has just broken out. The farmers are selling their lands for nothing; lawyers are abandoning their studies; merchants, ministers, presbyterians, methodists, or baptists, all are donning a red flannel shirt; and, a revolver in their belts, a carbine over their shoulders, they are going in long caravans toward the new Eldorado.

The wagons of emigrants, covered with a large canvas, are arranged on the inside with much order and neatness. It is a rolling cabin in which the owner must live for six or seven long months, and which he makes as comfortable as possible.

The pistols and guns, indispensable arsenal for the adventurer into the Far West, are hung on the interior walls of the wagon. In one corner is attached the cast-iron stove which is set up at each camp in order to cook biscuits; here and there are also hung household utensils and equipment. One finds in almost all these rolling tents some works of

history and geography, and always a Bible, the inseparable companion of the American emigrant.

Some emigrants write their name and profession on the outside of their canvas. I read on one of these wagons:

J. B. Smith, Dentist from New York
Ask the teamster.

The teamster was no other than the dentist himself. After having unhitched his oxen and cooked his dinner he put on a black coat, and, like the charlatans of our fairs, he had his victims get into the wagon, and he pulled their teeth, *without pain*, for the modest sum of one *piaster*.

They show me a large wagon covered with a white canvas with blue stripes and hermetically closed. It is inhabited, they tell me, by six young girls who are going to the gold mines to seek husbands and an independent position. They are said to be very pretty, and especially very *respectable*, and the proof of this latter assertion is that each evening they bolt their calico door with pins which shuts up their wagon.

Leaving, not without regret, the encampment of the emigrants, we pass rapidly the mouth of the Kansas River, Fort Leavenworth, the military establishment of great importance because of its position on the frontier of Indian territory, and Saint Joseph, a city founded yesterday and already rich and commercial.

There all traces of civilization stop. Farther up the river, the banks are desert, navigation becomes more difficult, and steamboats must give up travelling at night, in order to avoid the sand bars which often bar the river and necessitate continual soundings.

The bed of the river becomes more and more winding and the current so rapid that we take four hours to pass the mouth of the Sioux River. They were using full power, however, the boat was trembling in its whole frame; sometimes the forward end would disappear completely under the water which covered the deck; we would have advanced a few inches, but the current seemed to double its force and we would drop back again. Our captain, furious, has a barrel of resin thrown into the furnaces. It is a solemn moment for the passengers, who, while they dread an explosion, are keenly interested in the struggle.

What most impresses the traveller going up the Missouri, is the immense number of enormous trees, carried by the current and sticking in the muddy bed of the river, showing often only a point at the surface of the water and causing numerous and terrible disasters to boats. Sometimes these trunks of trees, tangled together and piled upon each other, form little islands covering an extent of several miles, and it is with difficulty that the boats can make their way by a thousand zigzags. Therefore it is impossible to navigate at night, and at sunset the boat

is solidly tied up at the shore. Since the country is totally uninhabited and since one finds there neither coal nor wood cut in advance, our eighty men of the crew, armed with axes, work great havoc in the old forests of cedars and poplars which grow on both banks.

The companies which engage in fur trading on American territory are only two in number: the American Fur Company, and that of the Opposition. The most inveterate hate exists between the employees of these two companies, and they do not hesitate before any means of doing each other mutual harm, when the occasion presents itself.

One day when we were passing in front of a *blokhaus* or winter post belonging to the Company of the Opposition, our captain took pleasure in sending his whole crew ashore to demolish houses, fortifications, and palisades. The whole was brought on board and provided fuel for a day's journey. A few days later, the boat belonging to the other company took vengeance by repeating, at another point, the innocent joke of our captain and completely destroying a winter post of the American Company.

This long trip becomes tiresome and monotonous. Day after day we go up stream and the volume of water which rolls on its bed of mud seems to augment under our keel, the islands of tree trunks are less numerous, the heavy growth of cottonwood trees which border the banks gives place to prairies as far as the eye can reach, and, sometimes, a column of

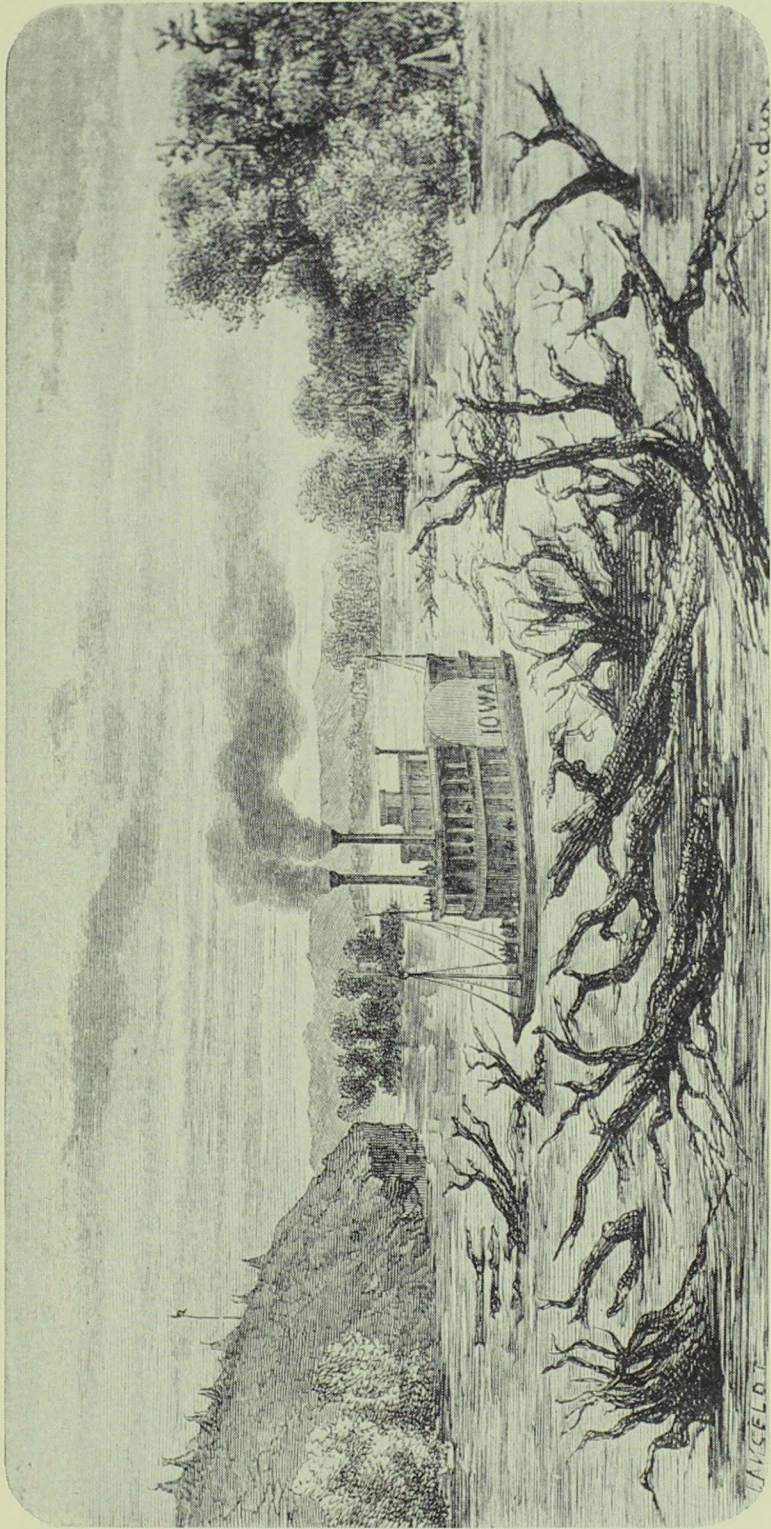
smoke visible on the horizon indicates an Indian camp.

The nights are burning hot. As soon as the boat is tied at the shore, millions of mosquitoes invade the lounges and the cabins. Then, in spite of the heat, we must put on gloves and wrap up face and neck heavily in kerchiefs and mufflers.

II

After a period of thirty-two days we see through the fog of the morning the immense American flag which floats over Fort Pierre Chouteau. The river is almost entirely closed by moving sandbars and we advance slowly, guided by soundings. Suddenly the wind springs up, the mist is scattered and gives place to a charming landscape which we greet with three cheers, and a volley from our small artillery. Before us stands Fort Pierre with its fortifications and its white walls. All around rise hundreds of habitations of buffalo skin, some dazzlingly white, others striped and covered with fantastic and primitive paintings.

A few steps from us on the shore, a group of Indians in holiday costume, their faces painted red, yellow and white, as motionless as statues, leaning on their guns, examine us with a somber and restless air. Undoubtedly, they are asking themselves what this fire boat holds, which, last year, brought them cholera, and if this time it is not the bearer of some even more terrible scourge.



FROM A SKETCH IN LE TOUR DU MONDE

STEAMBOAT NAVIGATION ON THE MISSOURI RIVER

We have scarcely landed when some fifty young warriors and women swarm upon our deck, enter the lounge, the kitchens, everywhere in fact, examining, touching and tasting everything, and in spite of the remonstrances of our negro cooks, a huge kettle filled with boiled corn is emptied in an instant. The rest of the provisions would undoubtedly have suffered the same fate, if one of the chiefs had not arrived in time to disperse this band of hungry wolves with his whip.

Order is soon reëstablished, and a dozen savages well armed and uniformly dressed by the Company, play the part of guards and police officers in a dignified and worthy manner.

Fort Pierre is an immense square formed by four walls in the form of palisades five meters high and two hundred long. It is protected on the north, on the east, and on the southeast by three bastions armed with cannon.

The Company buildings are constructed parallel to the palisades. These are the houses of the employees, directors, clerks, interpreters, then immense storehouses filled with provisions, with merchandise and with furs, a smithy where they make axes, tomahawks, and knives for the Indians, carpenter shops, a tin-smithy, and finally the sheds and stables and the powder magazine.

The governor of the fort receives us in the most gracious fashion, and has one of his wives prepare for us a most excellent dinner, in which are included

buffalo tongues, pemmican or dried buffalo meat, and excellent corn bread.

Having lived for a number of years in this Sioux territory, he has adopted certain Indian customs and among others polygamy, not, he tells us, with an unworthy motive but simply as good policy and in the interest of his business. Surrounded by seven wives belonging to seven different tribes of the Dakota nation, he has thus the advantage of being assured the devotion of an army of brothers-in-law, uncles and cousins, which gives him a great influence and facilitates his relations with the Indians. We repeat this excuse for what it may be worth.

Wishing to celebrate the arrival of the steamboat, the governor gave a great feast followed by a ball. The first consisted of a bottle of whisky, a pound of flour, and a little buffalo lard for each of the guests, composed of travellers, hunters, scouts, etc.

The fires are lighted in the middle of the fort. They make great piles of pancakes over which they pour copious libations. Two violin players, one a Canadian, the other Irish, perched on the top of a barrel, recall to me country weddings in my own land.

All take part in the dance: employees, hunters, half-breeds, negroes, mulattoes and Indians; and all these figures, white, yellow, black, copper colored and brick colored, lighted by the reddish flame and excited by a new distribution of whisky, have about them something really diabolical. Heads become

hot, old quarrels reappear upon the carpet, fisticuffs rain from all sides, half-breeds reply with knife thrusts, the Indians brandish their tomahawks. They make threats with their guns for the next day, then they begin again their dance without noticing that all the women have escaped during the fight. Such are the intermissions in the festivals at Fort Chouteau.

The day after our arrival at the fort, I was in the Sioux camp occupied with making a drawing of Warhorse, a famous warrior whose unusual costume had struck me. The finished sketch circulated from hand to hand when suddenly my valiant model takes possession of it, dashes off on his horse and escapes at full gallop, leaving me more mystified because the young warriors and the girls were laughing uproariously, doubtless finding the joke excellent.

During my residence among the Sioux it was almost impossible for me to do the portrait of the warriors or even a sketch of their camp, because they imagined that once master of their likeness I would have the power to destroy them as easily as it. The Sioux, who had been cruelly decimated by cholera and smallpox, diseases brought into their midst by the white men, are excessively superstitious and believe that the Americans make use of diseases as a weapon to exterminate them.

The Indian cemetery is situated at one kilometer from Fort Pierre, on a plain where a great many wild horses graze. The Sioux never bury their dead.

They roll them in their best woolen blankets and enclose them in a kind of bier sometimes made of cedar boards roughly hewn, though most often of branches of trees. Five poles driven into the ground support this kind of coffin, which is thus raised eight to ten feet above the ground and protected from dampness and wild beasts.

The relatives are careful to place by the side of the dead man a pipe, a little tobacco, a bow and some arrows, a few provisions, and various articles of which the dead may have need during his long trip into the other world.

But in time, the poles rot, the whole construction falls down and the wolves and the *coyotes* or little wolves, which prowl ceaselessly around these cemeteries, scatter afar the bones of the poor Indians.

Sometimes also the Sioux content themselves by enveloping the dead man in a blanket of scarlet wool, and suspending him in the high branches of a cedar or cottonwood tree. The Sioux have by way of religion only vague and ill-defined ideas. It is true that they generally pray to the great Spirit in moments of danger, and that they offer to it sacrifices of furs and sometimes also a feast of fat dog but they seem to believe that the good and the evil are equally happy in the other world.

Like all the Indian tribes, the Sioux regard women as very inferior beings which the great Spirit has given to them to put up their tents, saddle their horses, etc.

As for the old men they are even more mistreated. In times of abundance, they eat the left-overs, in days of famine, they die of hunger and are often abandoned in the desert when they are too weak to walk.

E. DE GIRARDIN