

# The **P**ALIMPSEST

AUGUST 1932

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PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY  
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA  
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912



### THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

*Superintendent*

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### THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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PRICE—10c per copy: \$1 per year: free to members of Society

ADDRESS—The State Historical Society      Iowa City Iowa



# THE PALIMPSEST

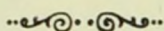
EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XIII

ISSUED IN AUGUST 1932

NO. 8

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## The Voyage of the *Virginia*

It was April 21, 1823. A motley crowd had gathered on the Saint Louis levee. Squalid Indians intermingled with roughly clad immigrants, levee loungers, lead miners, and fur traders. A sprinkling of soldiers and officials added color to the general confusion and bustle. All eyes were centered on the steamboat *Virginia* which lay at the levee with steam in her boilers, preparing to carry government supplies to the posts on the Upper Mississippi.

Built at Wheeling, Virginia, in 1819, the *Virginia* was a small stern-wheeler of 109.32 tons, and was owned by Redick McKee, James Pemberton, and seven others. She was 118 feet long, 18 feet 10 inches beam, and her depth was 5 feet 2 inches. She had a small cabin on deck but no pilot house, being guided by a tiller at the stern. James Pemberton acted as master occasionally



and John Crawford seems to have held the position of captain officially.

Among the passengers aboard the boat was Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian Agent at Fort St. Anthony which was renamed Fort Snelling in 1824. Taliaferro superintended the movement of supplies on the *Virginia*. He no doubt imparted a great deal of information about the trip to Giacomo Constantine Beltrami, the Italian exile and explorer, who was the sole chronicler of the events of the journey. Another passenger was Great Eagle, a Sauk Indian chief, whom William Clark had prevailed upon to board the *Virginia* while his less fortunate tribesmen made their way along the banks. A Kentucky family bound for the lead mines at Galena was on board "with their arms and baggage, cats and dogs, hens and turkeys; the children too had their own stock." A woman missionary bound for the lead mines to work among the Indians completed the list of known passengers.

Finally all was in readiness and the last passenger had hastily scrambled aboard. Amid cries of farewell and the good wishes of those gathered on the levee to see her off, the *Virginia* swung gracefully out into the channel on an "enterprise of the boldest, of the most extraordinary nature; and probably unparalleled." Many



skeptics shook their heads, doubtful of the practicability of steamboats crossing the rapids of the Mississippi. For days after the departure of the boat "there was great speculation as to whether the steamboat would ever return".

The current of the Mississippi seemed to grow swifter as the *Virginia* entered the Chain of Rocks channel a few miles above Saint Louis. "We were approaching the mouth of the Missouri, which is only eighteen miles from that town", Beltrami remarked, "and notwithstanding the power of our steamboat, we did not come in sight of this river before eight o'clock the following morning." The ease with which the *Virginia* passed the mouth of the Missouri was attributed to the presence of an island which obstructed the flow of that mighty stream, thereby breaking the pressure of its enormous volume.

Sixteen miles above the mouth of the Missouri a series of towering bluffs attracted the attention of the venturesome Italian. "The eastern bank of the Mississippi, opposite the village called *Portage des Sioux*, leading from the Illinois to the Missouri," he noted, "rises in abrupt rocks, hewn by nature into perpendicular pillars." Piasa Bluff gave him an illusion of viewing the palaces of Pompeii and Domitian on Lake Albano.

A few miles above the mouth of the Illinois, the



*Virginia* entered the great bend of the Mississippi. Leaving picturesque *Cap au Gris* rock behind, she churned on past Clarksville to Louisiana, "two pretty rising villages" on the Missouri shore, the latter being about a hundred miles from Saint Louis. With the exception of the forts along the way, Louisiana was the "last vestige of civilization" before Prairie du Chien was reached.

Beltrami designated the woodland region about present-day Quincy, Illinois, as the *Prairie des Liards* because of the extensive growth of poplar and cottonwood. He was amazed by the thick masses of trees which covered the islands and flood plains and stretched as far as the eye could see to the low-lying hills beyond. It would be a bad country to get lost in, he thought.

One day while the *Virginia* was wooding up, Beltrami ventured alone into the forest. A flock of wild turkeys eluded his pursuit and he continued his walk, soliloquizing on the beauty of the plant and animal life about him. Suddenly realizing that considerable time had elapsed, he hurried back to the river only to find the boat gone. Panic-stricken, he discharged his gun frantically, hoping to attract attention. The echoes resounded vainly in the great forest. Fortunately the *Virginia* struck a sand bar and Beltrami's absence was discovered. A canoe was sent to



rescue him and he was brought back, completely exhausted from his mad rush through the heavy underbrush along the muddy bank in pursuit of the boat.

When Beltrami returned to the *Virginia* he found that Great Eagle and the pilot had quarreled because the Indian had recommended taking a certain channel while the pilot insisted on taking another. When the boat struck the sand bar Great Eagle was so vexed that without further ado he plunged into the stream, swam ashore, and joined his fellow tribesmen who were making their way along the bank. This event probably occurred in the "Channel of the Foxes" a short distance below Fort Edwards.

The following day the *Virginia* arrived at Fort Edwards, where Great Eagle was found surrounded by members of his tribe. They had arrived before the *Virginia*, had set up a temporary encampment, and "were exchanging furs with the traders of the South-west Company." Great Eagle came aboard to get his bow, quiver, and gun. He was still exasperated with the officers of the boat but greeted Beltrami warmly. The latter, coveting the scalp of a Sioux chief that Great Eagle carried "suspended by the hair to the handle of his tomahawk", took advantage of this favorable moment to inveigle the much prized



trophy from him. Upon visiting the Sauk lodges, Beltrami was struck by the perfect equality exhibited by the Indians, even their dogs, their young bears and otters being treated as a part of the community.

Beltrami carefully observed the position of the fort, "built upon a promontory on the eastern bank of the Mississippi; its situation, which is very pleasant, commands a great extent of the river and the surrounding country, as well as the mouth of the river Le Moine [Des Moines] which descends from the west and is navigable for three hundred miles into the interior. The banks of this river are inhabited by the Yawohas [Iowas], a savage people, who have been almost entirely destroyed by the Sioux." At the time of the voyage of the *Virginia* the land west of the Mississippi and north of the Missouri boundary line was "distinguished only under the name of *Savage Lands*". No other traces of civilization existed in what is now Iowa and Minnesota than a few scattered huts belonging to half-breed traders.

After being pleasantly entertained by the officers of the garrison, the visitors boarded the *Virginia* and continued on their journey to the foot of the Des Moines or Lower Rapids, a hitherto impassable barrier for steamboats. In 1820 the steamboat *Western Engineer* had proceeded to



this point, but the sturdy conqueror of the Missouri did not dare venture farther. Indeed, she had repeatedly grounded in the channel below Fort Edwards and only returned to Saint Louis with the greatest difficulty.

In spite of an excellent stage of water, the *Virginia* proceeded cautiously, since the sharp jutting rock would crush the hull of the stoutest steamboat. For nine miles the perilous ascent continued, until the boat succeeded in squirming her way up to the "Middle of the Rapids of the Moine". There she was forced to return, her heavy load and draught being too great to effect the passage, and it was only by sheer good luck that the vessel escaped a rock and was saved from being dashed to pieces. Fortunately the damage was slight. Two days later, with a considerably lightened cargo, the *Virginia* succeeded in reaching the head of the rapids, where a party of Sauk Indians was encamped on the east bank of the river, near the present site of Nauvoo, Illinois.

Nine miles farther upstream the ruins of old Fort Madison on the west bank drew Beltrami's attention. It had been established in 1808 as an entrepôt for the Indian trade of that region. The government had abandoned its factory system in 1822, thus leaving the field open to the "South West Company" which, together with a rival



organization, monopolized the commerce of almost the whole savage region.

A short distance above Fort Madison the *Virginia* glided by the mouth of the "Bete Puante" or Skunk River. The Indian name for the precipitous "Yellow Hills" on the east bank of the river is perpetuated in the town of Oquawka, Illinois. Not far above the yellow banks, on the west side, the mouth of the "Yahowas" or Iowa River came in view. From this point on the beauty of the Mississippi held Beltrami spellbound. "Wooded islands, disposed in beautiful order by the hand of nature, continually varied the picture: the course of the river, which had become calm and smooth, reflected the dazzling rays of the sun like glass; smiling hills formed a delightful contrast with the immense prairies, which are like oceans, and the monotony of which is relieved by isolated clusters of thick and massy trees."

Leaving the Grande Prairie Mascotin in her wake, the *Virginia* rounded a bend in the river just in time for Beltrami to gain a "distant and exquisitely blended view" of Rock Island. Fort Armstrong stood at the foot of this island on a plateau about fifty feet above the level of the river. The eastern bank of the Mississippi above the mouth of Rock River was lined with an encampment of Fox Indians, allies of the Sauks, and re-



sembling them in features, dress, weapons, customs, and language. On the western shore of the Mississippi, "a semicircular hill, clothed with trees and underwood," enclosed a fertile spot carefully cultivated into fields and kitchen gardens. The fort saluted with four discharges of cannon, and the Indians paid the same compliment with their muskets.

While the *Virginia* lay at Fort Armstrong and prepared for the ascent of the Upper Rapids, Beltrami paid a visit to the great Indian village of Saukenuk. Situated about three miles to the southeast on the north bank of the Rock River, Saukenuk was the largest encampment of the Sauk tribe in the Mississippi Valley.

Beltrami was astonished at the skill exhibited by the youthful Sauks with their bows and arrows. They almost exhausted his supply of coins by hitting with ease small pieces twenty-five paces distant. To prevent the utter depletion of his purse he was forced to remove these costly targets to a distance of thirty-five paces. Smoked bear and highly flavored roots served as welcome refreshments during this sport.

The Sauks had never heard of any people other than the French, English, Spaniards, and Americans. They were surprised to learn that Beltrami was of a different nationality. Their aston-

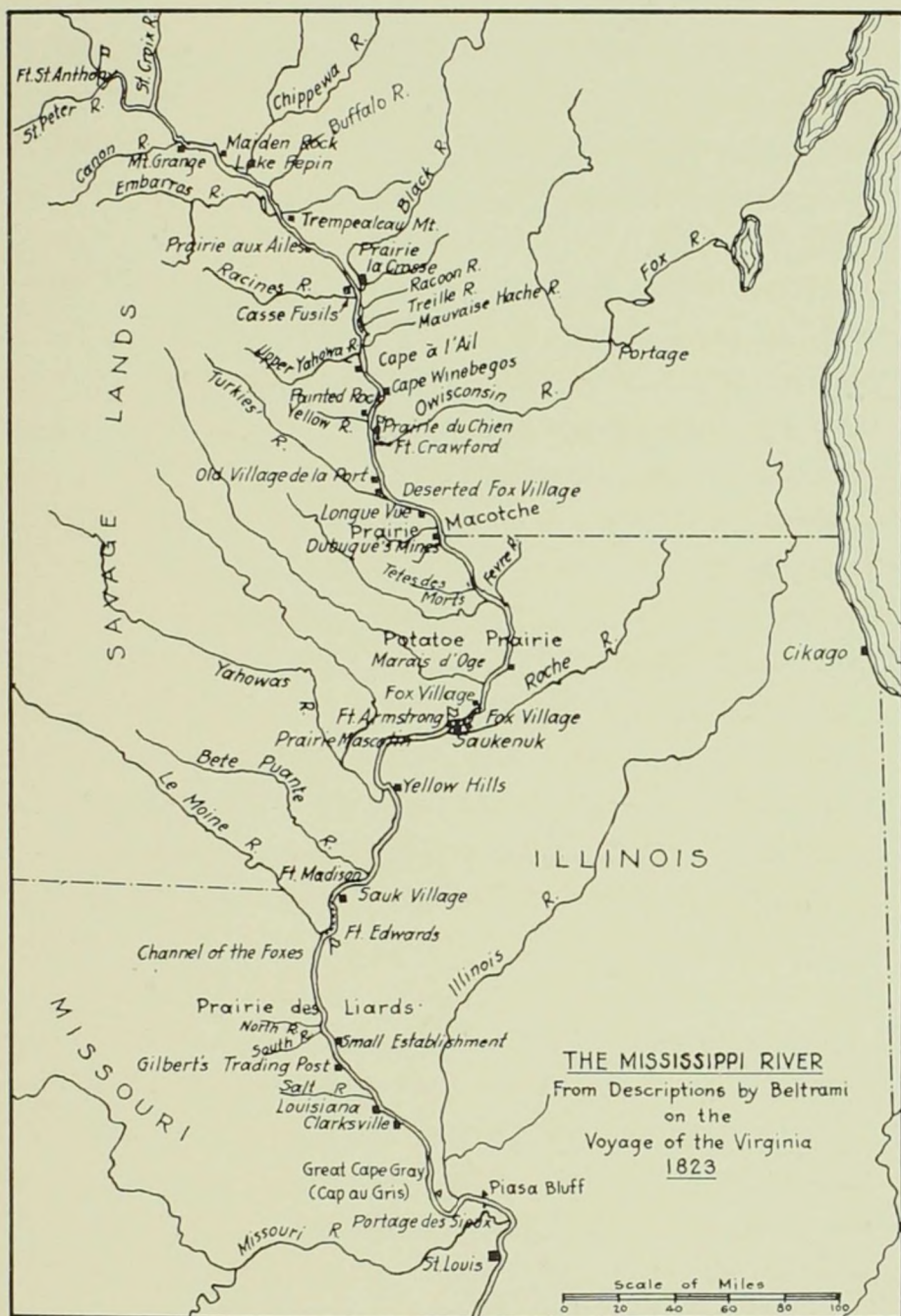


ishment turned to veneration when he told them he had come from the moon, but when the wily Italian attempted to gain a "clandestine entrance" to the medicine dance he was promptly ejected. Nor did his terrestrial homeland enable him to secure a medicine bag until he had made a present of "good whiskey" both to the person who gave it to him and to the high-priest whose sanction was necessary to secure it.

The following day, with the assistance of Colonel George Davenport and his "patroon debuts" or steersman, the *Virginia* began the ascent of the Rock Island or Upper Rapids, which Beltrami observed were longer and swifter than the Des Moines or Lower Rapids. Suddenly the boat struck a rock and stuck fast. Every hand was instantly at work endeavoring to free the helpless craft. The fact that the river had been rising for two days helped the boat, which Beltrami believed would otherwise have remained "nailed" fast.

The crew of the *Virginia* was entirely exhausted by the labor involved in getting the boat over the rapids and the captain held her over for a few hours near the present site of Le Claire, Iowa, in order to give the men an opportunity to recover from their fatigue. Beltrami went ashore and succeeded in shooting a large rattlesnake







with which he returned in triumph to his fellow travellers.

Six miles above the rapids the *Virginia* passed a village of Foxes on the west bank of the river. A little higher up she passed the Wapsipinicon River flowing into the Mississippi from the west and the "Marais d'Oge" or Marais d'Osier Slough on the east bank. Steaming on past the present site of Clinton, Beltrami observed the "Potatoe Prairie" on the west side known to-day as Pomme de Terre Prairie. Higher up, after passing the rivers *la Pomme* and *la Garde* which ran westward, he "saw a place called the Death's-heads; a field of battle where the Foxes defeated the Kikassias [Kaskaskia], whose heads they fixed upon poles as trophies of their victory." This was at Tetes des Morts Creek, which empties into the Mississippi at the northern boundary of Jackson County.

The *Virginia* stopped at the mouth of the Fever River, now known as the Galena, and Beltrami considered its name "in perfect conformity with the effect of the bad air which prevails there." The family from Kentucky and the woman missionary debarked, while the other passengers spent a few hours visiting the lead mines.

Twelve miles above the mouth of the Galena River the lead mines of Dubuque came into view.



The Italian visitor was again obliged to resort to the use of "all-powerful whiskey" to obtain permission to see the mines. He found that the Indians were carrying on just enough mining to satisfy their needs in trade. They melted the lead into holes dug in the rock and reduced it to pigs in this manner. It was then carried across the river, for they would permit no white man to come to the mines to get lead. Despite these precautions Beltrami considered the mines so valuable and the Americans so enterprising that he doubted whether the Indians would long retain possession of them. His canny forecast was realized exactly a decade later.

Leaving the mines of Dubuque, the *Virginia* wound her way through a country of ever increasing beauty. Beltrami's pen was "struck motionless" as for forty miles the variety of scenes and objects solicited his attention and excited his astonishment. Rude and unkempt in its pristine grandeur, Eagle Point opened the way to "Prairie Macotche" as Beltrami labelled present-day Maquoketa Chute. At length a place which he felt might appropriately be called *Longue Vue* [Buena Vista?], elicited the following description: "Twelve small isolated mountains present themselves in defile, and project one behind another, like side-scenes. They are intersected by



small valleys; each has its rivulet, which divides it, and reflects from its limpid streams the beauty of the trees by which its banks are adorned. These hills exhibit a mixture of the gloomy and the gay, while those which appear at the back of the scene are veiled with magical effect in the transparent mist of the horizon. On the eastern bank a verdant meadow rises with gentle slope to a distant prospect, formed and bounded by a small chain of abrupt mountains. Little islands, studded with clumps of trees, among which the steamboat was winding its course, appeared like the most enchanting gardens."

A deserted Fox village was seen on the banks of the Turkey River. Eight miles farther up, the *Virginia* passed the "Old Village de la Port" where Guttenberg now stands. There the pretended territorial jurisdiction of the Foxes was said to terminate, but these savage warriors often hunted beyond their domain, thus continually precipitating bloody wars with the Sioux.

The importance of the Wisconsin River as a highway for the fur trader was noted as the *Virginia* passed the confluence of that stream with the Mississippi. Six miles above this point the boat hove in sight of Prairie du Chien. She had travelled almost five hundred miles and this little French settlement was the only village to present



any of the earmarks of civilization. South of the village stood a "wretched wooden fort, named fort Crawford".

The passengers lost no time in poking about the interesting French settlement. Some "gloomy and ferocious" Winnebago Indians caught Beltrami's eye but he refused to shake hands with "Mai-Pock" upon learning that he had regaled his friends with human flesh. This was "an expression of contempt the most severe and humiliating an Indian" could receive. The industrious and friendly Menominee were commended for their refusal to join the English in the War of 1812.

Bidding farewell to Prairie du Chien, where Joseph Rolette had politely entertained them, the voyagers began the last lap of the long journey to the northernmost military post on the Upper Mississippi. An uncharted channel fully two hundred miles in extent remained to be traversed before Captain Crawford could discharge the last of his cargo, and once more turn the bow of his gallant little craft downstream.

About six miles from Prairie du Chien, near the mouth of the Yellow River, stood a rock which was painted red and yellow every year and which the Indians looked upon with veneration. The Mississippi at this point presented scenes of pe-



culiar novelty. "The hills disappear, the number of islands increases, the waters divide into various branches, and the bed of the river in some places extends to a breadth of nearly three miles, which is greater by one half than at St. Louis; and, what is very remarkable, its depth is not diminished".

Conspicuous landmarks were noted as the *Virginia* threaded this network of channels. At the foot of Winneshiek Slough a mighty rampart called "Cape Winebegos" still stands guard over what is now Lynxville, Wisconsin. Cone-shaped Capoli Bluff, a few miles below present-day Lansing, was described as Cape a l'Ail Sauvage. The whole region is known to-day as the Winneshiek Bottoms and forms an important section of the Upper Mississippi Wild Life Refuge.

The *Virginia* usually stopped at dusk as it would have been foolhardy to proceed in an unknown channel, hitherto unnavigated by a steamboat. But one evening as they were about to tie up for the night it was found possible to go on, for suddenly the entire river was illuminated by the distant glow of a gigantic forest fire.

"It was perfectly dark, and we were at the mouth of the river Yahowa [Upper Iowa]", wrote Beltrami, "when we saw at a great distance all the combined images of the infernal regions in full perfection. . . . The venerable trees of



these eternal forests were on fire, which had communicated to the grass and brushwood, and these had been borne by a violent north-west wind to the adjacent plains and valleys. The flames towering above the tops of the hills and mountains, where the wind raged with most violence, gave them the appearance of volcanoes, at the moment of their most terrific eruptions; and the fire winding in its descent through places covered with grass, exhibited an exact resemblance of the undulating lava of Vesuvius or *Ætna*. . . . This fire accompanied us with some variations for fifteen miles. . . . Showers of large sparks, which fell upon us, excited terror in some, and laughter in others. I do not believe that I shall ever again witness such astonishing contrasts of light and darkness, of the pathetic and the comic, the formidable and the amusing, the wonderful and the grotesque."

The *Virginia* travelled all night by the aid of this superb torch. During the night she passed the Bad Axe and Raccoon rivers but at dawn the tired craft ran aground "by way of resting herself".

A few miles above the river *aux Racines* (Root), Beltrami noticed a place called "Casse-Fusils" (broken muskets) from the fact that a party of Indians, jealous of another band armed



with English guns, attacked them and broke their muskets. This incident probably occurred opposite the present site of LaCrosse, Wisconsin, near a point now known as Broken Arrow Slough.

Puffing resolutely on past the mouth of the Black River, the *Virginia* entered the beautiful and romantic country around the present site of Winona. The majestic bluffs were likened to those on the Rhine between Bingen and Koblenz. All Beltrami's powers of expression were exhausted by mighty Trempealeau, the mountain that walks in the water. "Amid a number of delightful little islands, encircled by the river, rises a mountain of conical form equally isolated. You climb amid cedars and cypresses, strikingly contrasted with the rocks which intersect them, and from the summit you command a view of valleys, prairies, and distances in which the eye loses itself. From this point I saw both the last and the first rays of a splendid sun gild the lovely picture. The western bank presents another illusion to the eye. Mountains, ruggedly broken into abrupt rocks, which appear cut perpendicularly into towers, steeples, cottages, &c., appear precisely like towns and villages."

A Sioux Indian encampment was observed at "*la Prairie aux Ailes*" (Winona) and the *Virginia* landed. Wrapped in a wretched buffalo



skin, Chief Wabasha came on board followed by a motley array of warriors. Major Taliaferro greeted Wabasha with "plenty of shakes by the hand," and smoked the calumet of peace while Beltrami acted as "ape" to this "troop of comedians". Wabasha was greatly impressed with the construction and performance of the *Virginia*. The intricacy of the engine especially appealed to him. When members of the Stephen H. Long expedition passed his village in keel boats a short time later he expressed deep interest in the *Virginia* and was particularly curious about the construction of the engine and the principle on which it worked.

Leaving Chief Wabasha behind, the *Virginia* entered a section of the Mississippi that was "diversified by hills, plains, meadows, and forests." The Buffalo and Chippewa rivers were seen flowing into the Mississippi from the east. Below modern Wabasha the Embarras or Zumbro River drained a region called the Great Encampment.

Just above the mouth of the Chippewa, the *Virginia* entered an "elliptical amphitheatre" encircled by little hills known as Lake Pepin. Varying from one to three miles in width throughout its course of twenty-two miles, Lake Pepin is so deep that boats have no difficulty in navigating



it even during seasons of low water. In stormy weather its waters are lashed into a fury and steamboats seldom venture upon it. As the *Virginia* was plowing her way through, a terrific squall struck the lake and it was only by means of superb navigation on the part of Captain Crawford that she was able to wallow her way to safety. Staring Indians, transfixed with astonishment upon the bank, were the only spectators of this thrilling and almost fatal incident.

On the eastern shore near the head of Lake Pepin towers romantic Maiden Rock. Another Sioux village hove in sight at the Mountain of the Grange, now known as Barn Bluff at Red Wing. Here again the chief and his leading warriors came on board. After the travelers solemnly smoked the peace pipe and gave ear to some long and woefully dull speeches, the *Virginia* continued upstream. Above the mouth of the Cannon River the Mississippi became narrower and less studded with islands while the bluffs were steeper and more imposing. All on board must have experienced a thrill as they passed the St. Croix River and realized that the long journey was almost at an end. Medicine Wood, Pine Bend, and Little Crow's Village at the Grand Marais were soon left behind. While the *Virginia* was wooding up, the passengers were told



of a small valley of cedars, firs, and cypresses leading to a cavern named in honor of Jonathan Carver.

On May 10, 1823, the *Virginia* nosed her way into the St. Peter's or Minnesota River and came to a well-earned rest under the frowning cliffs upon which Fort St. Anthony was built. When the Indians saw the *Virginia* "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." When the tired boat began to blow off steam the frightened warriors "took to the woods, men, women, and children, with their blankets flying in the wind, some tumbling in the brush which entangled their feet as they ran away — some hallooing, some crying, to the great amusement of the people on board the steamboat."

The *Virginia* made the long journey of seven hundred miles in twenty days. She met with many delays. During the course of the journey she struck five sand bars, four below Prairie du Chien and one above. Approximately five days had been spent in getting over the Des Moines and the Rock Island rapids. Wood was burned for fuel and since none had been prepared in advance the *Virginia* had been forced to lay over



while fresh supplies were cut by the crew. Several days must have been lost in the process of wooding up. Moreover, with the exception of the night of the forest fire, the engines had stopped each day at sundown.

The voyage of the *Virginia* established the practicability of navigating the Upper Mississippi by steamboat. Later in the year she completed two more trips above the rapids, one to the mouth of the St. Peter's and another to Fort Crawford. After these trips the government did not hesitate to utilize a quicker and more reliable way of moving troops and supplies than had previously been used. With the advent of steam navigation it became evident that the Mississippi provided the most expeditious and natural outlet for the huge quantities of lead that were just beginning to be produced and were soon to reach enormous volumes. The river was to become also the main artery along which the great waves of immigration moved steadily northward into the Upper Mississippi Valley. No other means of transportation was capable of serving this region so well before the advent of the railroad.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN



## Chance

In the summer of 1863 Sophia Maria Smith was teaching her second term of school about a mile from her home near Washington Center in Will County, Illinois. One evening after her pupils had left the schoolroom she was looking over the Chicago *Tribune* when she came upon this advertisement: "Three young men, who are not officers, would like to correspond with the same number of young ladies, those who believe that the rank is but the guinea stamp — a man's a man for all that." One of the three names signed to this request was "Richard Rolfe".

Advertisements of that kind were not unusual, inasmuch as there were numerous agencies to make the life of the soldier in camp less monotonous, and young women were urged to do what they could in this way through letters to the field. To do her part Miss Smith replied to Mr. Rolfe:

"Dear Sir,

I have read your advertisement and heartily endorse the sentiment expressed. If you wish to know more of me and will accept me as a correspondent address

Miss Sophie M. Smith."



She had consulted no one. Weeks passed without a reply. Then one night came a letter in a strange hand, postmarked Bridgeport, Alabama. To use her own words, Sophie was "honestly frightened". Perhaps she had done something very wrong indeed, for "what would Mother say?" It should be remembered that this was in 1863.

The letter was carried home and read to the family as an interesting report from the camp life of the soldier. Her action in undertaking such "war work" was approved and thereafter the mother's counsel was a regular part of the letter writing to Mr. Rolfe. In his first communication on August 3rd he described himself as the Sergeant-Major of the Eighty-eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry in Rosecrans's army, an educated man, past the period of youth, then twenty-eight years of age, an editor by profession, an abolitionist in politics, and he had entered the army for the purpose of assisting to crush the rebellion and to kill slavery, the "proximate cause of it". For that purpose he had "subordinated friendship, ease, comfort, and cultured associations". Unless Miss Smith agreed with his views he felt sure that he would prove to be a "very uninteresting correspondent". Whether she agreed or not, she certainly found his letters full of interest.



On September 15th he wrote from the bivouac of the Army of the Cumberland on Lookout Mountain. "Last night at 9 o'clock, my dear friend Sophie, your favor of the 8th came to hand. We had been marching all day; climb, climb, climb, dust, dust, dust, ankle deep ever, knee-deep often, filling the air with a thick and horrible pall that blotted out the sun and that, ground to the finest powder by the tread of innumerable feet and the crush of myriad wheels, entered eyes, mouth, garments, lungs, ears, nostrils, choking, blinding, stifling, strangling, creating a maddening thirst, and not a drop of water for eight weary miles: all with the thermometer among the nineties, and you can have some faint conception of what, with the burden of blankets, haversacks, canteens, rations, equipment, and arms, our poor boys have to undergo during Southern dog-days."

In October of the same year he was compelled to add this note to his letter: "I am under the necessity of mailing this *unpaid*. All my stamps are gone, and none can be purchased for love or money. When I get some I will enclose payment for this." The battle of Chickamauga had been fought since his last letter. "I lost many friends", he wrote, "chief of whom was Gen. Lytle, commanding our Brigade . . . It is true that I am only a Sergeant-Major while he was a General,



and yet he loved me as a brother while I would have died to save him. . . . His death is the bitterest sorrow and loss I have known in years . . . I do not often write for the journals now. I am glad enough to escape from the drudgery of *thought-grinding* for a little while, but I do sometimes write a letter to the *Chicago Tribune* over the signature 'Ex-Orderly'. . . . I have traveled quite a little; paying my expenses with my pen; and I shall be very glad some day, when the hurry and bustle of the campaign is over, to give you inklings of what I have seen, heard, felt, and been a part of. I have fought border ruffians in Kansas, clambered over the steep mountains of Switzerland, taken part in the 'fandangoes' of the Mexicans, drunk lager with the jolly oleaginous Germans of 'Faderland', stumped it among the Hoosiers of the West, lectured to cultured audiences in the East, am not quite ignorant of Paris, while England is pretty familiar to my remembrance." As to himself: "Proud, poor (this in its most literal and absolute sense; when was there a rich scribbler?) educated, after a sort; fond of books, more especially old ones, thinking a good deal more of Homer and Shakespeare, Bacon and Macaulay, with their kindred, than of farms and factories and merchandise and stocks and bonds."

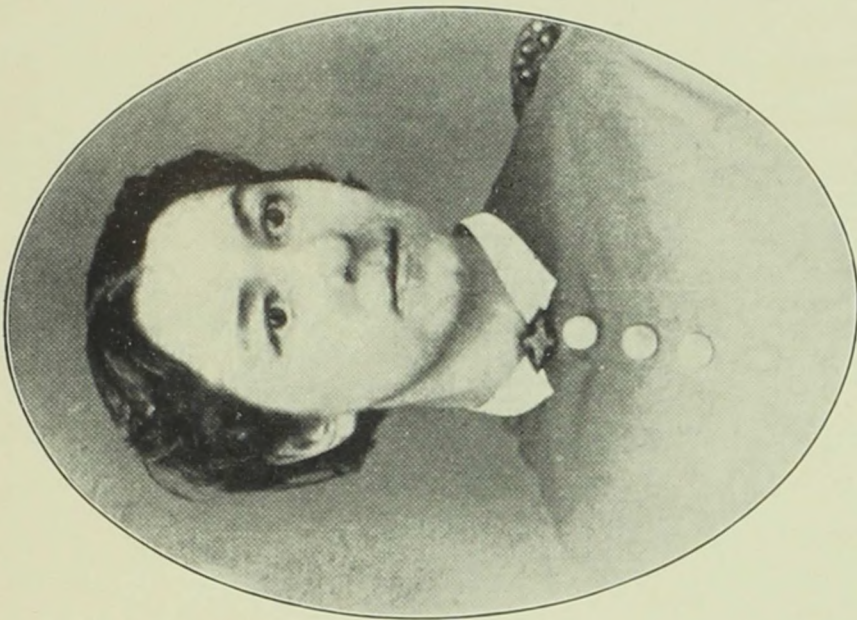
In reply Miss Smith gave him a full description



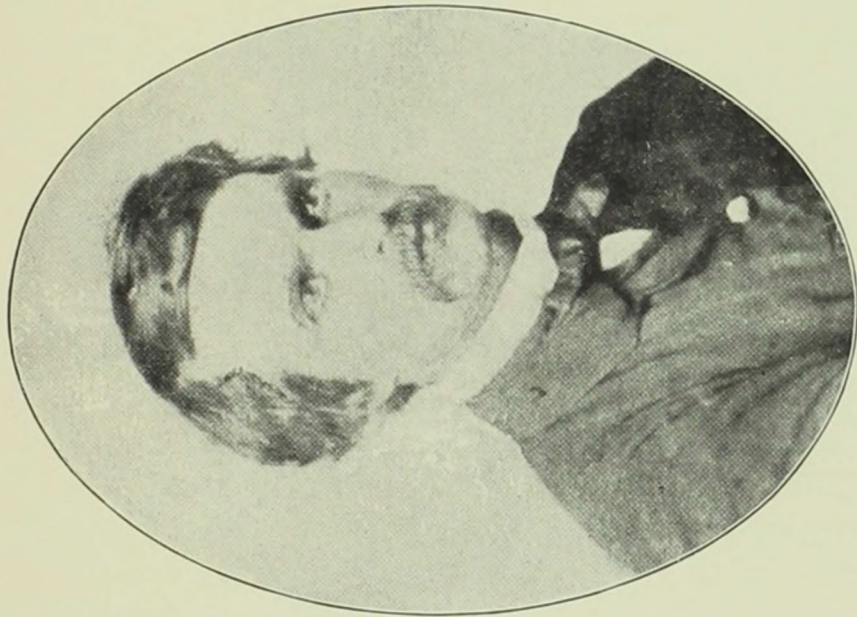
of the every-day life on the prairies of Illinois seventy years ago. Unfortunately none of her letters was copied and she can recall them only in a general way. He asked for socks and forthwith she secured the yarn and brought in some of her young friends to knit for the soldiers. In due time they were forwarded to him and his letters show his keen interest in their arrival. Disappointment awaited him, however, since they must have been lost in the mails. Or possibly some other soldier was glad to have them.

In November, 1863, the Eighty-eighth Illinois Infantry was at Chattanooga and a letter from there gave some of his personal history. "Did I ever tell you that I was an Englishman and only a citizen of 9 years duration? . . . I was in Europe at the outbreaking of the war. I gave up a good many things pleasant to the sense and to the soul, when I came back to fight, . . . and endured a good deal of obloquy and ill-feeling from my countrymen, but I do not at all regret having done so, because I know that what I did was wise and right. . . . I should have hated myself alike for cowardice and inconsistency, had I stood aloof when the battle of liberty began to rage. . . . I am sorry that the first 'article' of mine with which you have met should be so mangled by the printers as was 'After the Battle'. It





SOPHIA MARIA SMITH



RICHARD REALE



is a little singular that you should have seen none of my letters before, as I have corresponded occasionally with the Tribune for 15 months."

Just after Christmas, 1863, he wrote from camp near Knoxville, Tennessee. "It is dark and I scribble only by the occasional glare of a gusty fire that almost smokes my eyes out in the effort. A friend of mine leaves for Chattanooga in the morning, and has promised to mail a letter for me. . . . I shall be glad to receive the socks, . . . I shall prize them very greatly, indeed."

For some time he had been anticipating a furlough and had threatened to come to Illinois to visit his correspondent. He declared that he was developing a great affection for her. The prospect was really alarming to Sophie, however, inasmuch as such an outcome of her venture had not been expected. But to her relief, he was just then promoted to the rank of first lieutenant and adjutant which required his services on the field. The furlough was postponed indefinitely.

On January 10, 1864, he wrote from the winter camp at "Blane's X Roads" in Tennessee, where "cooped up in the midst of these bleak mountains, separated from everything, home, friends, books, papers, and even the mail, you cannot imagine how horribly tedious and dull it is. To make matters worse, we are on half rations,



without tents, insufficiently clad, and the weather is as cold as the climate of Greenland. The snow falls fast as I write, and last night I was nearly frozen in bed. . . . What a magnificent fight that of ours at Missionary Ridge was — do you not think so? Have you ever read, in any history, of a charge more gallant, an assault more desperate, a victory more complete and thorough?"

"Camp of 88th Ill. Vol. Inf.

Loudon, Tenn., Feb. 23, 1864.

"You have grievously misjudged me if you have entertained a suspicion that because you are an 'Irish girl instead of an American, and a farmer's daughter instead of an heiress,' I should suffer the correspondence to cease, or lose my interest in whatever concerns you. On the contrary, I should have been ashamed of you had you yourself been ashamed to acknowledge either your social status or your native land. I do not know that honest poverty and labor involve any degradation, and the country of O'Connell and Sheridan, and Burke and Grattan, and Curran and Moore, and later of Meagher and Corcoran and a thousand other wise and brave men is not to be ignored or despised. I have already told you that I am an Englishman; let us shake hands across St. George's Channel; let the British rose claim



fellowship with the Irish shamrock. You are no poorer than myself."

And so the correspondence ended; Richard Rolfe was on the way with Sherman toward the sea and there were no more letters to Illinois, after one of March 20, 1864. Miss Smith wondered about the long silence until she read of the march through Georgia, the severance of contact with the North, and the consequent interruption of mail service.

Sophia Maria Smith was born ninety years ago on May 1, 1842, in Ballintrain, Ireland. In 1849, after six weeks on the ocean, having sailed in the *Patrick Henry*, she landed with her parents in New York and went at once to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1855 they moved west to Will County, Illinois, where eight years later she read and reflected on the events of the Civil War.

In 1867 she became the wife of Henry Lee Leonard who, after hearing his neighbor tell of the land in Iowa as the most beautiful "that ever lay out of doors", decided to move there. This neighbor had bought all the land that lies now between Waukee and Ortonville in Dallas County, and to that section of the "beautiful land" the Leonard family came in 1869; and there they have been ever since, and there on May first of this



year Mrs. Sophia M. Leonard celebrated her ninetieth birthday with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The first forty acres grew into a large farm; the first "shack", as Mrs. Leonard calls it, grew into a commodious farm house. Furthermore, the common herd gave way to blooded cattle as early as 1884, although it was considered almost a scandal forty years ago when Mr. Leonard paid \$800 for a pure bred Hereford cow. Being a progressive farmer he adopted modern methods early, even tiling his farms when such a practical device had not been thoroughly tested. Later he was "selecting seed corn and judging live stock with a shrewd eye", years before the "Holden Seed Corn Special" and individual stock judging teams came into public notice.

Fifteen years after the events of 1863 the farm life in Iowa had been well established in comfort and prosperity, a fine family was growing up to carry on the Leonard traditions, while the days of adventure and war correspondence were almost forgotten. And then in 1878 the newspapers reported the suicide of Richard Realf, a resident of Oakland, California. Circumstances revealed that he was the Richard Rolfe of the Eighty-eighth Illinois Infantry who had written the eleven letters to Sophie M. Smith of Washington



Center, Illinois. He had never used the name "Realf" then; nor did he refer to his association with John Brown's band in the winter of 1857-58 at the Maxson home near Springdale in Cedar County, Iowa. Only once did he suggest any connection with the contest in Kansas where he joined Brown just before coming to Iowa for that winter's training.

In order to know more of her former correspondent, Mrs. Leonard, in 1878, wrote to the *Chicago Tribune* for information. It came in due time and was substantially as it appears in the *Cyclopedia of American Biography*. Luke Parsons, the last survivor of the men that wintered with Brown at Springdale, says of Realf: "He was small of stature, dark, black hair and eyes; always neatly clad and he would make a good impression anywhere". And, he added, "He was a poetic genius."

Richard Realf was popular that winter in the community about the Maxson farm in Cedar County, where there was study and training for the adventure at Harper's Ferry that failed in 1858 only to be executed in 1859. He was known as the poet of the company, although, at the same time, he was able to stir his audiences by his fiery addresses. Before coming to the United States he had been recognized by a "brilliant circle of



literary people at Brighton". It has been generally said, also, that he was at one time a protégé of Lady Byron and was favored by a brother of Lord Alfred Tennyson. A collection of his poems prefaced by a nephew of Thackeray was published in Brighton in 1852. His verses descriptive of the struggle against the slave power in Kansas won for him the epithet of "Kansas free state poet". It is said, too, that some of his best lyrics were written in the field while a soldier.

Realf was not with John Brown at Harper's Ferry. After the failure in 1858 he had gone to England. Later, returning to Texas, he was found and brought before the Senate committee that investigated the Brown conspiracy. Having enlisted as a private in 1862, he served in the Union army until the end of the war, participating in the Chattanooga campaign and Sherman's march to the sea. While convalescing from wounds in 1865, he contracted an unfortunate marriage, but presently secured a divorce and was married again in 1867. Poverty, misfortune, and his former wife followed him for a decade and eventually drove him to suicide in San Francisco.

Just before swallowing the laudanum that caused his death he expressed his melancholy disillusionment in a farewell poem. "Speak nothing but good of the dead", he pleaded.



"De Mortuis nil nisi bonum", when  
For me the end has come and I am dead,  
And the little voluble, chattering daws of men  
Peck at me curiously, let it then be said  
By some one brave enough to speak the truth:  
Here lies a great soul killed by cruel wrong.  
Down all the balmy days of his fresh youth  
To his bleak, desolate noon, with sword and song,  
And speech that rushed up hotly from the heart,  
He wrought for liberty, till his own wound  
(He had been stabbed) concealed with painful art  
Through wasting years, mastered him and he swooned  
And sank there where you see him lying now  
With the word "Failure" written on his brow.

But say that he succeeded. If he missed  
World's honours and world's plaudits, and the wage  
Of the world's deft lacqueys, still his lips were kissed  
Daily by those high angels who assuage  
The thirstings of the poets — for he was  
Born into singing — and the burthen lay  
Mightily on him, and he moaned because  
He could not rightly utter to the day  
What God taught in the night. Sometimes nathless  
Power fell upon him, and upright tongues of flame,  
And blessings reached him from poor souls in stress,  
And benedictions from black pits of shame,  
And little children's love, and old men's prayers,  
And a Great Hand that led him unawares.

So he died rich. And if his eyes were blurred  
With big films — silence! he is in his grave.  
Greatly he suffered; greatly, too, he erred;  
Yet brake his heart in trying to be brave.



"De Mortuis Nil Nisi Bonum" was published with the account of his death. On June 10, 1928, it was reprinted on the book page of the Des Moines *Register*, together with some account of the strange career of the man who wrote it. There it came to the attention of Mrs. Leonard whose recollection of her old correspondence was again revived. The original letters she received from Richard Realf (Rolfe), now yellowed with age, are in the care of her daughter, Mrs. Walter Packard, Menlo Park, California.

CLARENCE R. AURNER



## Comment by the Editor

### FRUSTRATION

Richard Realf was a sentimental idealist. Never content to engage in common employment, never satisfied long in one place, he seemed to be groping about the world in quest of beauty or adventure or righteousness. Even as a youth he was restless and precocious, living in a realm of fancy more than reality. Nurtured in the society of Lady Byron and literary celebrities, he produced a book of poems entitled *Guesses at the Beautiful*, when he was eighteen.

Before he was twenty, he fell in love with a high-born lady whose parents would not permit their marriage. It must have been a grievous injury to the boy who could describe a contemplated kiss as "a deep, delicious, ecstatic draught of divine rapture from humid lips on fire with royal passion; a kiss which would make your breath shudder with splendid intoxication and shoot tingling arrows of flame along your delicate veins". Obviously, he wrote from vivid memory and in eager hope.

Having come to America in 1854, he busied



himself with desultory writing and espoused the cause of liberty so ardently that John Brown selected him to be Secretary of State in his provisional government. There was substance in his character as well as zeal. For three long years he marched with Sherman and at the end was sorely wounded.

Sick, alone, disconsolate, he attracted the interest of a designing woman. His tender nature welcomed her as a potent charm to blow away "the misty moodiness of morbid brooding" and "conjure up healthful thinkings" that should put the "whole bevy of haunting witch-elves incontinently to flight." But as a wife, he found her utterly incompatible. They parted in poverty, but when he gained an attractive competence, she had their divorce annulled and badgered all his later years. In suicide, he found escape.

And so, the harsh conditions of misfortune and improvidence restricted him who willed to soar aloft.

J. E. B.



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