



*A view from the Missouri River bluffs overlooking the old site of Isle au Vouche (Cow Island), just below the town of Iatan, in Platte County. Named by early Frenchmen who were in this area as early as 1720. Mentioned frequently in Missouri River travels and was the site of “Cantonment Martin”, named after Captain Martin commander of three companies of troops that inhabited the island from September 1818 until relieved by the S.H. Long expedition in August 1819. Site of Indian Council by Major O’Fallon in August 1819. The Island contained several hundreds of acres but became a part of the Missouri mainland when the river changed course in 1881.*

# Cow Island

*by Dr. R.J. Felling*

## FORWARD

Since the end of the last

ice age, the Missouri River has flowed along a meandering route to the Mississippi River. The river changed course many times creating numerous islands and land features that do not exist today. The French were the first to explore the river during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and recorded their travel naming significant landmarks as they traveled up the river. Lewis and Clark followed documenting their route up the

Missouri and noting significant locations and landmarks.

One such landmark was a large island near current day Iatan, Missouri, where the French and American factual historic story begins.

The history surrounding this island cannot be better explained than the following four-part article written and researched by noted Platte County historian Dr. R.J. Felling in 1983 for Discover North.

Remain in history – *Isle Au Vauche*

A single ribbon of smoke rose high into the still summer sky of August 1819. Seated under a freshly cut arbor of willows and cottonwood was a delegation of more than 100 Kansas Indians. Their main chief, White Plumb, distinguished by his multi-colored turban that always covered his head, was seated upon a log facing the fire at the edge of the smoke hole. He was flanked by several lesser chiefs.

Opposite and facing the fire was the counterpart of the council, dressed in army blues with an occasional buckskin-clad woodsman leaning upon his long rifle. Sunlight danced on the brass epaulets of various ranks as it found its way through the shadowed arbor. In the background was a double file of shoulders standing at ease. Behind White Plumb the same sunbeams glistened upon the freshly shaved scalplocks and naked shoulders smeared with bear grease and red ochre.

To one side and appearing somewhat uncomfortable in the presence of their ancestral enemies, were several members of the Sauk and Fox tribes, distinguished by their handsome costumes and warlike appearance. At the other edge were a few members of the Osage, conspicuous by their giant physiques and colorful trappings, trying to feel at home with their cousins, the Kansas.

The first recorded council in what is now Platte County was being held on what was known as Cow Island or Isle Au Vauche, 166 years ago. This island consisted of about 1,500 acres. The head of the island was almost opposite Iatan, MO, and extended down- river to include where the power plant is today.

The river at Bean Lake turned east to bounce off the rocky bluff just north of Iatan. The west edge of the island was separated by a narrow “shoot.”

The advance group of more than 350 men and a few wives and hunters had been on the island for more than a year. They had built a fort and shelters but had suffered greatly. Steamboats ordered two years before had not been built, and when they were built, they were faulty. Two steamboats out of five did not make it. Most of our story is about the advance group and the hardships endured by them. A diary found a few years ago at Yale is believed to have been written by Dr. Gales, the medical man of the first group.

The two steamboats that made it were the *Yellowstone* and the *Expedition*. The Indians were more interested in examining the *Yellowstone* than listening to speeches. A sudden shrill whistle or spurt of steam in the direction of an inquisitive Indian would send them all scrambling.

Cow Island, or Isle Au Vauche, as the French trappers called it, had long been a stopping place for almost every expedition up the Missouri. The Frenchman, Sieur de Bourgnoyne had mentioned it in his early writings

in 1725. Earlier than that, a group of French traders had stopped upon the island to make camp. They were attracted by an odor that resembled a decaying animal. Investigating, they found the remains of a buffalo calf that had been drowned and washed down the Missouri to land upon the island. The French had no name for buffalo and referred to them as wild cows. Thus, the place became Island of the Cow – *Isle Au Vauche*, or Cow Island.

The well-known Lewis and Clark expedition mentioned Cow Island in 1804 and several expeditions that went up the Missouri River in the early 1800s mentioned the island as a favorite camping spot as they traveled up the highway of the Missouri River. High above the flood plains, it was almost attached to the west shore except for a small chute. The main channel was on the east side of the island.

This small, remote spot, in what is now Platte County, is an area of many firsts consisting of about one-fourth a section of land. (When the Kansas City Power and Light Company and the St. Joseph Power and Light Company decided to build their multimillion-dollar power plant upon this spot, they probably had no intentions of adding another first. Besides the first Indian council record in Platte County, the 700-foot concrete and steel stack will just about center the first Army fort in what is now Platte County.)

Dr. Gale's diary details some of the experiences of the men and women who spent the winter of 1818 on Cow Island. The contingency of 356 officers, men, and some civilians, including wives, were late in leaving Belle Fontane near St. Louis and were to set up a cantonment or fort at Council Bluffs for the upcoming H.S. Long expedition the following spring. The delay had been caused, for the most part, by the civilian contractors. The entire group was fraught with many disappointments. There was graft and mismanagement with the civilian contractors; supplies were not ready in St. Louis; steamboats that had been ordered were not built on time- then they had proven faulty and non-functional. There was general mismanagement, misappropriations, and general

confusion. In fact, we might add another first for our country- at that time only 50 years old. The problems with the expedition may have prompted the nation's first Congressional Investigation.

The military leaders grew tired of waiting for complete supplies and the expedition got under way in the late summer of 1818. It departed from Belle Fontane almost six months late. The group may have been short of foodstuff and some ordnances, but it was well supplied with several hundred gallons of whiskey.

The armada consisted of ten keel boats, each carrying 35 tons of men and supplies. The boats were rigged with oar locks, sails, and anchors and cordelle ropes. Each boat carried an equal amount of food, powder, and quarter-master ordnance. A commissioned officer was in charge of each boat, and they were to reach Council Bluffs and establish fort that summer.

The majority of the days were spent in cordelling the boats in calm winds. A cordelle was a rope fastened to the top of the mast and stretched out along the bank with 20 men pulling. They slipped and slid through the mud, often wading neck deep while fighting off mosquitoes, snakes, insects, and general discomfort and fatigue. Sometimes they would pull for hours—to find they were in a blind chute. At the end of a day, they fell exhausted on a sandbar. Their reward was a shank of venison if the hunters had been successful. Other rations were a pint of greasy mush washed down with a gill of whiskey. It is a little wonder that several desertions are recorded.

On September 19, they stopped at the little town of Franklin, just across from present-day Boonville. It was the last settlement on the Missouri River. They had quite a celebration. Some men, sensing that it was their last chance, took advantage and deserted. Most of the men—assisted by some of the women— did some washing and the next day continued on up the river. The flotilla arrived at Fort Osage on October 5, 1818. Their

supplies were replenished, along with a large herd of cattle that they had purchased from a Mr. Patrick.

The history of Saline County states that a Mr. Patrick raised cattle in Multibend, where he had holdings of several thousand acres. He agreed to deliver the cattle overland to Council Bluffs. They remained three days at the fort. Before leaving, they were able to trade 22 less efficient men for 22 soldiers at the fort.

On October 13, they made the turn of the Missouri, where Kansas City now stands. It had taken them six weeks to cross the state of Missouri. The diary mentioned Hay Cabin and Sugar Camp Creeks. It stated that a large orchard of sugar maples grew along its banks. It was here that they found the corpse of a deserter who had previously broken into the trunk of Captain Riley and had taken \$100. He had committed suicide by shooting himself. There is no mention of any traders living in the future Kansas City area, but they do mention that they met several bands of Kansas Indians on their way to Fort Osage.

After making the turn in the Missouri at the Kaw, they were able to use more sail. They killed several deer and bear and saw many *parroquetes*, a colorful, small parrot. With the weather getting a little frosty, they realized they would be unable to reach Council Bluffs. A small party was sent ahead to find a suitable location for winter quarters. They had already experienced some frost and thin ice.

On October 15, they reached Bear Medicine Island. This island was later named Kickapoo Island and is now connected to the present site of Weston. They also noted the remains of old Fort Cavagnolle, located on Salt Creek just above the present site of Fort Leavenworth and opposite Weston. It had been mentioned almost the same way and written in the Lewis and Clark diary sixteen years previously. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, they met their advance party on Cow Island and decided this was to be their winter camp. Orders were given to set up tents immediately and for the first time in fifty days they rested under canvas.

