

Cow Island

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 18th 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.

All writings should have a conclusion thus the following is the final chapter to Cow Island history written and researched by noted Platte County historian Dr. R.J. Felling in 1983 for Discover North. We will continue to contribute articles written by Dr. Felling such as “Indians in the Platte Country” in future issues of the Museum Musings.

Remain in history – *Isle Au Vauche*

The beautiful island, called by the French *Isle Au Vauche* or Island of the Cow, contained about 1,500 acres and was located opposite the present site of Iatan and extended down the river about 1¼ miles. The diary describes the island as a lush growth of giant sycamore and cottonwood well above flooding. This would indicate the island had been there a long time. Work detail started immediately the next day to cut logs to begin construction of barracks. Oak punchen floors covered the dirt,

with clapboard roofs—the walls of stockade pickets were constructed of heavy logs.

When finished it resembled a rectangle over 200 feet long with block houses at opposite corners. The first and only fort in what is now Platte County had been completed.

The work had not gone on unattended or unnoticed. Several groups of Otoe, Iowa, and Kansas Indians had filed in with curiosity. On November 2, some 30 lodges of Kansans moved to the island and sent up their teepees adjacent to the fort. On November 6, a group of Sauk Indians arrived and made quite a spectacle with their fantastically painted bodies and their freshly shaved scalp locks gleaming in red paint. They were the most feared and warlike tribes of the middle west.

An attempt was made by the command to entertain the guests and a band concert was ordered with the cannons that roared in obligato. The Indians gazed in wonder and amazement. The next day when the Indians attempted to leave, it was found that they were trying to make off with supplies from the settlement. A fight resulted in which two soldiers were accidentally wounded. Several of the Indians were taken prisoner and later publicly whipped and turned loose. This triggered a winter of unrest and it became unsafe for hunting parties to go out in small groups and skirmishes were common, but not much bloodshed.



On one occasion Mr. O'Fellon, the settler, was coming down the river where he met some Otoes and Omaha that he thought were friendly. One Indian boasted of having killed a white man a few years before. He tried to cause more trouble. Mr. O'Fellon ordered the Indian secured. Then they cut off the poor fellow's ears and threw them and his weapons into the river. He was turned loose to carry the message back to his people.

The diary describes how the prairies had been burning all fall with the sky filled with smoke. This was the annual custom of the Indians. This made hunting better as the deer were driven down into the sandbars and marshes. Several times during the winter he described the unbelievable task of Patrick driving herds of cattle from central Missouri to Cow Island. He often stopped by Indians where he had to relinquish one or two of his cattle and then allowed to proceed.

On December 6, Dr. Gales performed a complete leg amputation on William Whitney, a soldier who had been accidentally shot in the knee. The remarkable part was that the man lived and is mentioned later in the diary when he was taken down the river the next spring. Dr. Gales had no formal education. He had started as a junior surgeon during the War of 1812, but must have observed and assisted a lot, for we find him now as Chief of Staff, so to speak. But as author of the diary, he gives no details of the procedure. This was before anesthesia and one can imagine getting the patient drunk and strapping him down on a table while they removed a leg, unmindful of his screams. However, it must have touched the hearts of his comrades because it was recorded here the first relief fund in Platte County when the command subscribed \$700 for his benefit.

Another first: an incident occurred that could well reflect the present mixed-up attitude of the world. It happened when a party of Osage Indians came across the country in pursuit of another party of Iowa and Otoe who had stolen some horses from them. The command at the fort helped the Osages cross the river, supplied them with ammunition and encouraged them to pursue their original intentions. We find the diary filled with various incidents along this line. At another time it may

reflect the present-day policy when Lieutenant Clark was arrested for having mistreated a citizen and was brought to court-marshal trial.

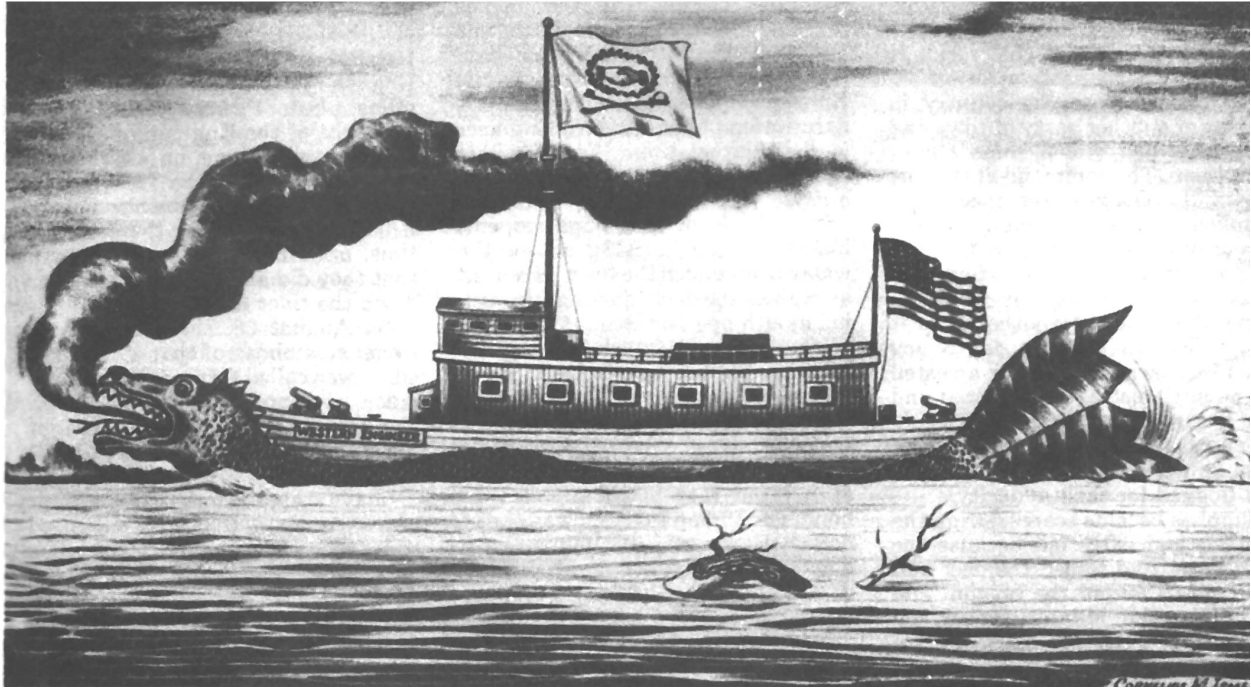
Several times during the summer Indians were brought into the fort and flogged for their audacity.

Supplies became scarce during the summer and early fall because the high water had forced the deer and other game out of the bottom and back into the hills. However, on August 11, 1819, the diary reports that Captain Martin returned from a hunting expedition having killed 300 deer, 20 bear and collected five barrels of honey. However, two of his men had been accidentally shot, but only wounded.

On August 15, 1819, the steamboat, *The Western Engineer*, arrived with much celebration. Major Long was aboard, as well as other ranking officials including the Indian agent, Benjamin O'Fellon, brother of the present settler. John Daugherty, the assistant agent to Major O'Fellon, had been sent on West to invite the Kansas Indians to a real counsel. A description of the Western Engineer is very interesting. We take this description from the *St. Louis Inquiry*, "The bow of the vessel exhibits the form of a huge serpent, black and scaly, rising out of the water from under the boat. His head as high as the deck, darting forward, his mouth open omitting the smoke from the smokestack, apparently carrying the boat on its back. From under the boat at the stern issues a stream of foaming water dashing violently along. All the machinery is hidden. The boat ascends the stream at a rapid rate of three miles an hour. The Indian reaction was one of horror. He stated, "White man keep a great spirit chained and build fire under him to make him work the boat."

During the summer, a number of sachets were made into what is now Platte County. One such expedition occurred in which a number of men went east as far as the Platte River and up the Platte River to Hundred and Two River. From the description in the diary, it implies that the name One Hundred Two was given to that branch of the Platte River, although it's not made entirely clear whether it's 102 leagues from the mouth of the Platte River or else the 102 River is 102 leagues long. An English league is usually three miles, but I have seen some reference of

the English mile. From the river they came on west to the Missouri about where St. Joseph now is. They make no mention of the Ribodeau group living there at that time, but from all history we know that they did and then they came on down the river to Cow Island. On August 28, the only conventional steamboat of that time arrived. It was called *Expedition* and was laden with provisions. Also aboard was the Sixth Infantry that brought up the contingency to almost 1,290 men.



I have stated before that the other two steamboats that were supposed to be with the expedition had fallen by the wayside sometime after leaving St. Louis. One, I think, gave up the trip just about one hundred miles west of St. Louis and one was able to reach almost as far as Fort Osage before having engine trouble and returning to St. Louis. After the men had become located on the island arrangements had been made to gather all the Indians in this locality and the counsel that was described at the early part of the article ensued a few days after the arrival. It was rather peculiar how Major Daughtery dressed down the Indians for their actions of preying upon the various travelers as they were coming up the river and he made his remarks with no uncertain emphasis that they would not tolerate such procedures and told the Indians that good behavior was expected. When the flotilla moved out to go on to Council

Bluffs it was August 5, 1819 and 16 keel boats and the *Western Engineer* were the entire party. One company remained on the island.

In reading the diary we have tried to pick out some of the most interesting events and tell a story. What was the purpose of the expedition? The spectacular success of the Lewis & Clark expedition of 1804 and 1805 had stimulated a wide interest in the area west of the Mississippi River. The interest from the standpoint of our government would not be translated into action until after the War of 1812. During the years of rampant nationalism immediately after the conflict, many American leaders looked to the entrance west of the Mississippi as an area of strategic importance. We had one War of 1812 with England at a time when England's main problem was a confrontation with France. When our war started their war with France had been going on for 15 years. England being preoccupied during this time had allowed our young nation to build up a large shipping interest on the high seas. This had built our national economy to an all time high and had caused the War of 1812. We had won the war and after a reasonably good treasury it was natural to spread our young wings and flex our muscles. England still had interests in the West and was making an attempt to hold them by instigating anti-American feeling with the Indians of the Missouri Valley. So, it is this thought that the H. S. Long expedition was sent out.

The expedition had been responsible for several firsts in what is now Platte County. One, they had built the first fort in this area. Two, the first major surgical operation had been performed. Three, the first fireworks celebration had occurred—which was used to influence the Indians at the meeting. Four, the first substantial settlement in this area was made. Five, the first court marshal or trial by law in this area was held. They named Gausland Lake, later to be called Bean Lake.

The first congressional investigation arrived at Council Bluffs without any great events. They arrived in the fall of 1819 and proceeded to build groups of sheltered cabins close to the Missouri River and spent a very severe winter, experiencing much illness, scurvy, and a loss of a tremendous amount of morale. They were ready to set out early the next

Spring when the June rise of the Missouri in one of its capricious moments inundated their newly constructed post and washed everything away. Just about the same time word was received by overland dispatch that Congress had cut off all appropriations for the H. S. Long expedition and not to continue. They did make a somewhat anticlimactic try in a circle to the west on foot to the Rocky Mountains and down the Arkansas River to the Mississippi where they proceeded up the Mississippi to the original barracks at Belle Fontane. It was during this expedition that the giant peak in the mountains of Colorado was discovered and named Longs Peak in honor of H. S. Long, the commander of the expedition.

Today, as we leave Weston and drive north on Highway 45, we see the giant stack that has been constructed as we break through the hills to descend to the river bottom. Although not obelisk in shape, it is taller than the Washington Monument. As we proceed up 45, we can look to the west and think of it as a marker for those gallant soldiers and civilians who spent over a year on this spot. You might reminisce of all the conflicts that they went through. You might think of the thousands of deer and bear that were killed to supply meat for the post and the dozens of barrels of wild honey that were brought in. You think of Mr. Patrick who drove overland several herds of cattle from the Multibend area to try to supply fresh meat for the destitute group.

It is indeed almost a hallowed ground, but a no more fitting and permanent monument could be placed than this towering 700-foot stack of steel and concrete. For many years, the area was a part of Kansas and then became part of Missouri as the changing river brought about in the 1881 flood. The river is now to the west of this towering marker.

