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Missouri River

AMERICA'S
WATERWAY
WEST



A PUBLICATION OF THE
THOMAS GILCREASE INSTITUTE
OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND ART

American Scene

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The Missouri River

AMERICA'S WATERWAY WEST

Featuring excerpts from three narratives of riverboat travel in the trans-Mississippi West in the nineteenth century.

A great deal has been written on the subject of transportation in America as well as on the importance of the development in the nineteenth century of the western rivers as avenues of commerce. In the present instance, however, interest is centered not so much upon the history of transportation or commerce as on the experience of travel itself as described by those who crossed America's vast interior in a day when the greater part of it remained relatively unexplored and unexploited.

It is not possible, of course, to indicate all available sources within the bounds of so brief an article. Nevertheless, it is hoped that those which have been selected will prove entertaining to a readership accustomed to the easy mobility of the present age. Certainly, more factual accounts exist pertaining to travel in the American West more than a hundred years ago; yet the personal narratives reprinted here may be said to have a lasting value: for it is in the reading of such reports that we gain a clearer idea as to what such activity really was all about.

All references utilized in the preparation of this issue of the **American Scene** have been taken from original manuscripts or published texts to be found in the archival collections of the Gilcrease Library. The illustrations featured likewise have been reproduced from original works in the Institute's inventory of western American art.

Credit for the production of this publication goes to members of the Gilcrease editorial staff, listed opposite.

Researched and written for the American Scene
by David C. Hunt, Gilcrease curator of art.

Cover: a detail from plate depicting a scene along the course of the Upper Missouri; from Prince Maximilian's **Travels in the Interior of North America** (London, 1844).

The Missouri is, perhaps, different in appearance and character from all other rivers in the world; there is a terror in its manner which is sensibly felt, the moment we enter its muddy waters from the Mississippi. From the mouth of the Yellow Stone River, which is the place from whence I am now writing, to its junction with the Mississippi, a distance of 2,000 miles, the Missouri, with its boiling, turbid waters, sweeps off, in one unceasing current; and in the whole distance there is scarcely an eddy or resting-place for a canoe. Owing to the continual falling in of its rich alluvial banks, its water is always turbid and opaque, having, at all seasons of the year, the colour of a cup of chocolate or coffee, with sugar and cream stirred into it.

. . . I arrived at this place yesterday in the steamer "Yellow Stone," after a voyage of nearly three months from St. Louis, the greater part of which has never before been navigated by steam . . . The American Fur Company have erected here, for their protection against the savages, a very substantial Fort, with bastions armed with ordnance; and our approach to it under the continued roar of cannon for half an hour, and the shrill yells of the half-affrighted savages who lined the shores, presented a scene of the most thrilling and picturesque appearance . . .

So wrote George Catlin in 1832 from Fort Union on the upper reaches of the Missouri River where he had traveled in the company of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., scion of the famous fur trading family, aboard the newly built steamer, *Yellowstone*. At that time the largest establishment of its kind along the Missouri and perhaps in all the West, Fort Union served as the principal headquarters for the American Fur Company's business in that wild and lonely region: the veritable frontier palace of Scottish trader, Kenneth McKenzie, then at the height of his career entertaining guests at a table which, according to Catlin, "groans under the luxuries of the country. . . ."

Catlin's principal reason for making the long and difficult journey up the Missouri was, of course, to obtain portraits among the Indians of that distant region. For his study were "a host of wild and incongruous spirits — chiefs and sachems — warriors, braves, and women and children of different tribes . . .

"Amongst and in the midst of them am I, with my paint pots and canvas, snugly ensconced in one of the bastions of the Fort," he writes. "My easel stands before me, and the cool breach of a twelve-pounder makes me a comfortable seat."

The journey itself had been punctuated with many incidents to which Catlin refers in his proliferous notes and letters. The wild scenes described reflect upon a wilderness as yet untouched by the improvements of civilized men.

"A voyage so full of incident, and furnishing so many novel scenes of the picturesque and romantic," he continues in his *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians* published several years afterward, "as we have passed the numerous villages of the astonished natives, saluting them with the puffing of steam and the thunder of artillery, would afford the subject for many epistles; and I cannot deny myself the pleasure of occasionally giving you some little sketches of scenes that I have witnessed . . . and of the singular feelings that are excited in the breast of the stranger travelling through this interesting country."

The Missouri River constituted at this time the chief means by which access to the interior of the American continent could be attained, having achieved its initial fame as the route by which earliest explorers had penetrated the unknown regions west of the Mississippi at the beginning of the century. Lewis and Clark, the first to investigate the vast wilderness of Louisiana Territory, likewise had been the first to employ this river as their highway, traveling the length of its winding course to its headwaters in the Rockies above the present city of Helena, Montana. Shortly thereafter, Zebulon Pike had traveled from St. Louis up the Missouri to its junction with the Platte on the first leg of his memorable western expedition, and Major Stephen H. Long had journeyed about as far in 1819 aboard the *Western Engineer*: first steam propelled craft to be used on Missouri waters.

On the heels of these men came trappers and then traders to exploit the riches in furs to be had in this region. Hostility on the part of some of the local Indian tribes at first discouraged river trade; but by the mid 1820's two companies

had established themselves along the Missouri. The one was composed largely of men from the old British Northwest Company, and the other was the western branch of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. In 1828, Astor's company absorbed its rival, and by the time Catlin visited the area the American Company monopolized the Missouri trading scene.

Located about twenty miles above the mouth of the Platte north of the present Omaha, Nebraska, was the site of Cabanne's Post when Catlin accompanied the *Yellowstone* on its maiden voyage upriver. A few miles north along the west bank stood the remains of Fort Atkinson, a military outpost of the United States abandoned in 1827. Beyond and above, where the Missouri swings northward into the Dakotas, was the site of yet another post where the first white man to penetrate this region had

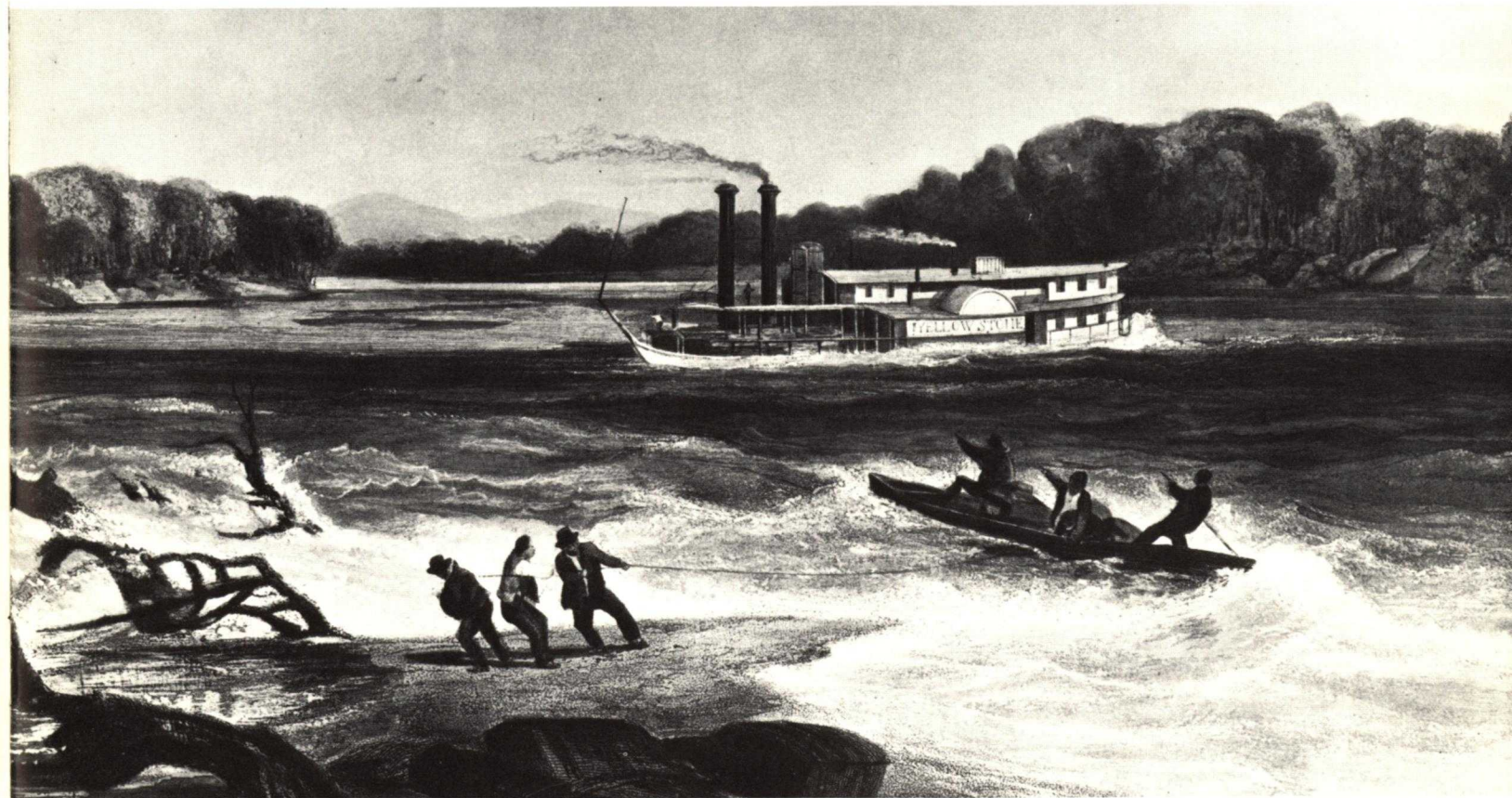
spent the winter of 1794. Beyond this point began a picturesque section of the river known as the Big Bend or "Grand Detour" where the Missouri described a gigantic S through the surrounding, rocky cliffs.

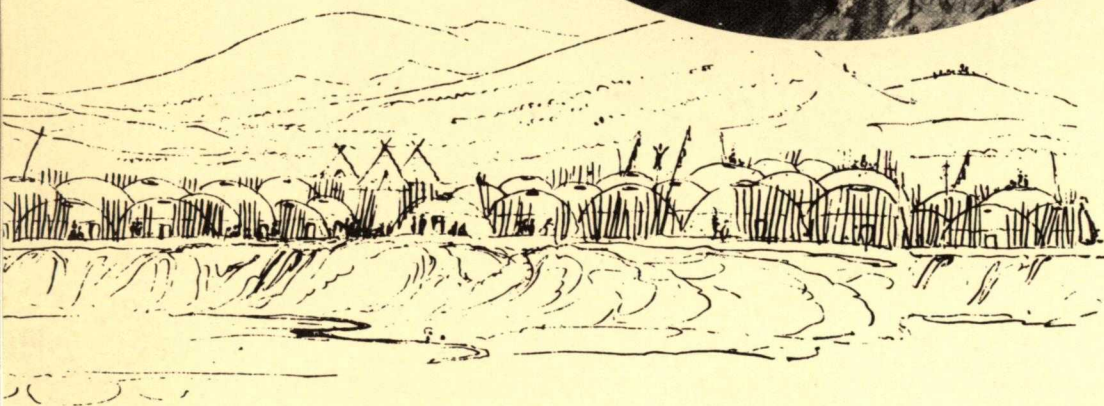
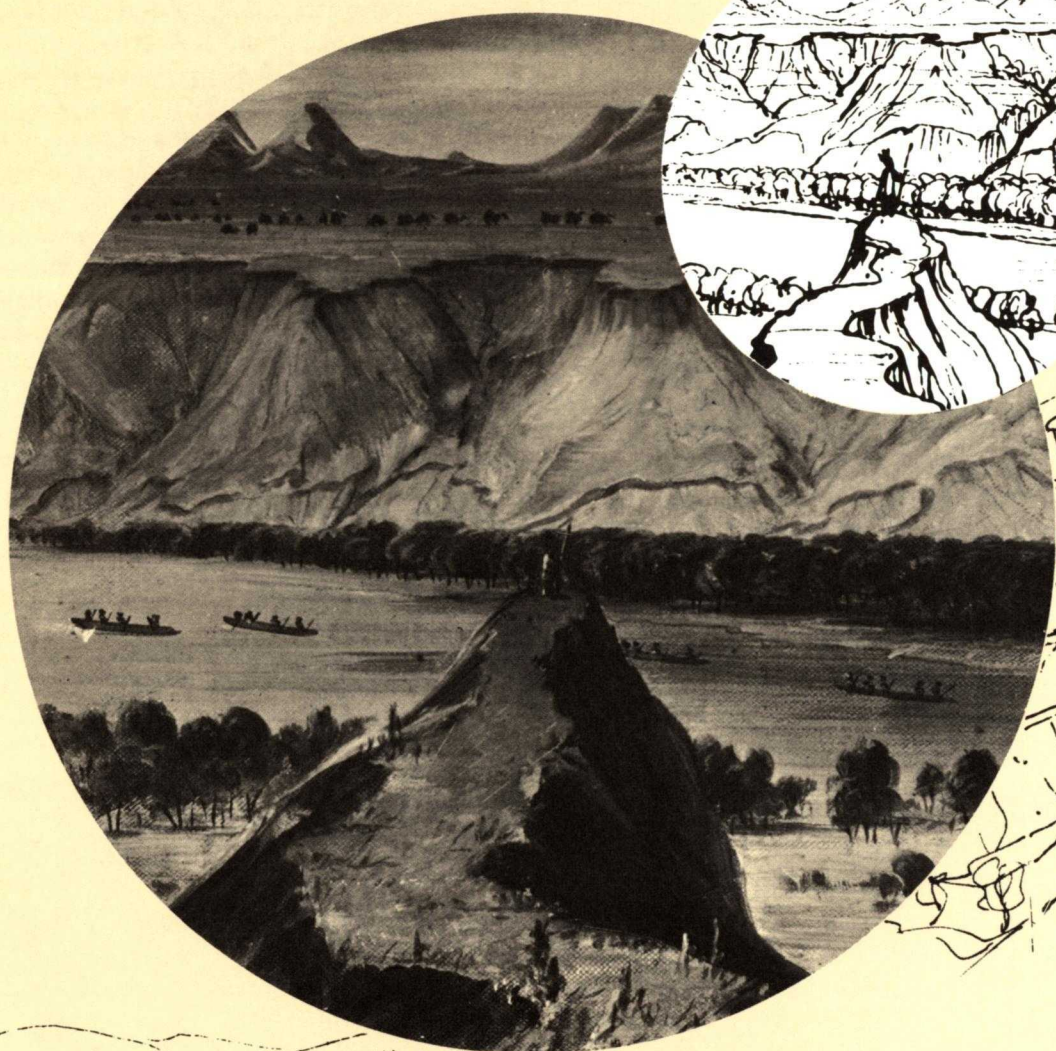
"Our canoe was here hauled ashore," recalls the artist, "and a day whiled away again amongst these day-built ruins" — referring to the weathered domes along the river's bank. "We clambered to their summits and enjoyed the distant view of the Missouri for many miles below, wending its way through the countless groups of clay and grass-covered hills."

Alluding to a study he made of a prominent range of bluffs in this region, he remarks:

The sketch of the bluffs denominated "the Grand Dome" is a faithful delineation of the

The Steamer *Yellowstone*. Engraved plate after Bodmer featured in *Travels in the Interior of North America* by Prince Maximilian of Wied. (London, 1844).





Scenes along the Missouri River are reproduced at left from originals by George Catlin to be found in the artist's sketchbook in the archives of the Gilcrease Library. A portion of an oil painting is also shown, one of more than two hundred Catlin paintings listed in the Gilcrease inventory of art at the present time.

The line drawing near left shows the "Grand Dome" and the line drawing far left depicts the "Riccree Indian Village" described elsewhere in Catlin's written account of his journey up the muddy Missouri in 1832.

lines and character of that wonderful scene; and the reader has here a just and striking illustration of the ruin-like appearance, as I have formerly described, that are so often met with on the banks of this mighty river . . .

This is, perhaps, one of the most grand and beautiful scenes of the kind to be met with in this country, owing to the perfect appearance of its several huge domes, turrets, and towers, which were everywhere as precise and as perfect in their forms as they are represented in the illustration. These stupendous works are produced by the continual washing down of the sides of these clay-formed hills; and although, in many instances, their sides, by exposure, have become so hardened, that their change is very slow.

Near the entrance of the White River, the Yellowstone struck and lodged upon one of the sandbars infesting the river. While the boat crew worked to free it, Catlin and Pierre Chouteau hiked overland to Fort Pierre located some 1300 miles above St. Louis. Named for Catlin's host and companion, this post was the center of fur trading activity with the Sioux in that vicinity and "drawing from all quarters," as Catlin remarks, "an immense and incredible number of

buffalo robes."

Chugging past Fort Manuel Lisa, the Yellowstone entered the territory of the present state of North Dakota, and near the mouth of the Grand River came into view of a number of earth lodge villages ranged along the banks of the river. Here, the Arikara, or "Riccreees" had their principal settlement. These people had a fearful reputation at the time, due to their hostility to explorers and traders earlier passing through this region.

"This village is built upon an open prairie," comments Catlin in his notes, "and the gracefully undulating hills that rise in the distance behind it are everywhere covered with a verdant green turf, without a tree or a bush anywhere to be seen."

He adds, however, with reference to the Indians, that "they certainly are harbouring the most resentful feelings at this time towards the Traders, and others passing on the river; and no doubt, that there is a great danger of the lives of any white men, who unluckily fall into their hands. They have recently sworn death and destruction to every white man, who comes their way; and there is no doubt, that they are ready to execute their threats."



Many kinds of craft were operating on the Missouri by this time. Canoes were the most common, perhaps, usually hewn from the trunks of trees and accommodating up to three men. Keel boats also were used to transport trade goods or travelers on business of the government to the western territories. On the Missouri, however, this shallow draft vessel was equipped with a number of extra pieces of equipment to expedite its progress upriver. Usually it had a mast and sail, carried oars to be used when the wind proved wanting, and a set of long poles that often were employed to "walk" the craft through the shallows or over sandbars for which the western rivers in general, and the Missouri in particular, were infamous. The upstream progress of such a boat could be tedious and often required the exertions of all hands, passengers included, who might be compelled to clamber ashore to drag their conveyance along at the end of a length of stout cable while others paddled, poled, or pushed.

The first steamboat on the Missouri had been built for the convenience of Major Long during his journey from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains in 1819. A remarkable craft for its time, this boat was designed to impress the natives of the wild regions through which Long was to travel. The bow was fashioned to resemble the head of a sea serpent from the mouth of which issued clouds of smoke. The machinery for propelling the boat was hidden by a superstructure, as was the paddle wheel at the stern which agitated the water in the supposed manner of some aquatic monster.

This awe inspiring vessel got no farther up the Missouri than the present Council Bluffs, however, and it was not until 1829 that a regular steamer made its appearance on that river plying between St. Louis and Fort Leavenworth. Three years later, the *Yellowstone* attempted the first voyage to its upper waters, and again in 1833 along with another steamer called the *Assiniboine*. In the following decades, steamer travel on the Missouri proceeded accordingly, with an average of one or two trips being made annually to the

distant forts and trading posts upriver by one or another of the fur company's packets.

Navigation of the Missouri was more difficult than on the Ohio or the Mississippi; for besides being filled with snags, shallows, and sandbars, the big western river was extraordinarily erratic regarding its course through any given locale. In common with many of the streams winding through the vast plains country, the Missouri was constantly shifting its position from one season to the next. Following heavy rains and flooding in an area, it would often be found flowing through a tract of country several miles from the channel it had occupied the previous year. It was an almost hopeless task, therefore, to maintain up-to-date knowledge of the position or condition of the river from season to season, and the various craft that plied its waters did so with care, prepared for any surprise.

Departures from St. Louis or St. Charles farther upstream invariably were attended by carousing and revelry, particularly among the keelboat and steamer crews; for in the early days of navigation on the Missouri, a trip to the interior might mean years of absence for those attempting it. Embarkation usually was accompanied by a barrage of musketry or cannon fire which kept up until the craft was out of sight or hearing. The business of getting the deck in order, passengers settled, and the bales of goods stowed below occupied the crew until nightfall.

The passengers in many instances represented a more heterogeneous mixture than the cargo itself. There was the regular boat crew numbering from about thirty to forty persons, perhaps a party of Indians returning from St. Louis or Washington, recruits for the various trading companies, and sometimes as well a company of soldiers destined for Leavenworth. Some years there were distinguished passengers of wealth or scientific rank aboard who were bound westward for the purposes of pleasure or research. In all, there were sometimes as many as two hundred people aboard a vessel en route to the upper waters of the Missouri in the heyday of travel on that river.

Camp of the Gros Ventres, opposite, is from an original plate found in Prince Maximilian's Travels in the Interior of North America. (detail).

Several kinds of river craft operating on the Mississippi and Missouri waterways in the nineteenth century are shown in the illustration below, taken from a colored engraving after Bodmer entitled **Tower Rock**, featured in Maximilian's **Travels in the Interior of North America**. (London, 1844).



The problem of securing fuel to keep the boat going was almost equal to that of feeding so many people on board. Enormous quantities of wood were used by the boat's furnaces, and its procurement was not always an easy matter. Wood yards were established at certain points along the way, in some localities operated by the friendlier Indians. More often, the cutting and loading of a supply of material for fuel was attended by threats and harassment from the natives.

The food furnished to passengers aboard the keelboats, piroques, and other craft operating on the river before the appearance of the steamers was of monotonous simplicity, consisting almost entirely of salt pork, beans, corn, and coffee. With the appearance of scientists and government men, however, the larders of the steamboats began to reflect more diversified tastes and experience. The demand for fresh meat kept certain members of the steamer crew busy. Hired expressly for the purpose, the hunter's only duty was to kill game for the table.

This man, or group of men, customarily went ahead of the boat, disembarking around midnight while the steamer was tied up along the shore. From then until ten or eleven o'clock the next morning, he scoured the country ahead for deer, antelope, bison, or whatever it afforded, stashing the game along the river bank, in a tree, or another conspicuous place to be picked up by the lookout aboard the boat next morning as it made its way upriver. The hunter or hunters were picked up about noon or thereabouts and had nothing further to do until nightfall.

Many narratives of travel through this region exist today. Perhaps the most comprehensive of those dealing with early steamboat travel on the river itself is to be found in the memoirs of Joseph La Barge, pioneer boatman, navigator, and trader. Other accounts survive indicating in considerable detail the natural history of the surrounding region. Of these, none presents a more graphic description of the Upper Missouri country than the journal compiled by an adventuring German prince by the name of Maximilian who, in the course of his travels

across North America in the 1830's, organized an expedition to explore the little known regions beyond the western frontier of the United States.

Like Catlin, Prince Maximilian followed the historic trail of Lewis and Clark aboard the *Yellowstone*, arriving at Fort Union the year following Catlin's visit to that post. Maximilian went a distance farther, however, on another steamer that reached McKenzie's headquarters at about the same time—a second of the American Fur Company's packets called the *Assiniboine*—which was caught by low water and subsequently compelled to remain amid the snow and ice of that distant country until the following spring.

Having kept a careful record of his experiences since arriving in Boston nearly a year earlier, the aristocratic Max also collected zoological and botanical specimens along the route of his travels, preserving all that he observed of that "remarkable country" in his notes. With his party was Karl Bodmer, a young Swiss artist chosen to accompany this expedition as its draftsman. A separate folio of colored engravings based upon Bodmer's work supplemented the first publication of the German prince's journal six years later presenting a pictorial survey of conditions in a region penetrated by few white men up to that time.

Widely traveled, Maximilian held a less romantic point of view regarding the American wilderness than many of his contemporaries. As a result, his journal consists not only of an interesting narrative of travel west of the Mississippi, but also presents a considerable record of scientific observations concerning the geography, climate, and aboriginal population of the western half of the continent. In the preface to the 1843 edition of his work as translated into English by H. Evans Lloyd, Maximilian explains his reasons for undertaking so arduous a voyage to "the upper part of the course of the Missouri," remarking that in his opinion the United States has done very little in the way of exploring this portion of the continent.

He comments further:

Some few scientific expeditions, among which the two under Major Long produced the most satisfactory results for natural history although



on a limited scale, were set on foot by the government; and it is only under its protection that a thorough investigation of those extensive wildernesses, especially in the Rocky Mountains, can be undertaken. Even Major Long's expeditions, however, are but poorly furnished with respect to natural history, for a faithful and vivid picture of those countries and their original inhabitants can never be placed before the eye without the aid of a fine portfolio of plates by the hand of a skillful artist. In my description of the voyage up the Missouri, I have endeavored to avail myself of the assistance of an able draughtsman, the want of which I so sensibly felt in my former travels in South America. On the present occasion I was accompanied by Mr. Bodmer, who has represented the Indian nations with great truth, and correct delineation of their characteristic features. His drawings will prove an important addition to our knowledge of this race of men, to whom so little attention has hitherto been paid.

Maximilian's journal records in exacting detail his every observation during the course of a day spent upon the muddy, snag infested Missouri. McKenzie, a Major Sanford, Indian agent, and Chouteau are mentioned as being among the passengers on this trip out of a company of nearly 100 persons, most of whom Maximilian describes as "the lowest class of servants of the Fur Company" otherwise known as *engages* or *voyageurs*—descendants of earlier French-speaking settlers along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.

He also notes the hazards of river travel and comments upon the dangers to be anticipated from the surrounding wilderness. Of the river itself, he remarks that its course is exceedingly wayward and strewn with hidden obstacles:

The Yellow Stone had several times struck against submerged trunks of trees, but it was purposely built very strong, for such dangerous voyages...

The drift wood on the sand banks, consisting of the trunks of large timber trees, forms a scene characteristic of the North American rivers; at least I saw nothing like it in Brazil, where most of the rivers rise in the primeval mountains or flow through more solid ground.



Retrieving game to be used for food among steamer crews and passengers during the long trip up the Missouri was not unaccompanied by difficulties, as artist Bodmer has depicted in his **Chasing Off Grizzlies**, opposite. This plate and the one featured above showing the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers are from the folio of illustrations which supplemented Prince Maximilian's publication of his **Travels**.

On the banks which we passed, the drifted trunks of trees were in many places already covered with sand; a border of willows and poplars was before the forest, and it is among these willow bushes that the Indians usually lie in ambush, when they intend to attack those who tow their vessels up the river by long ropes.

During the course of such a trip, while the officers and crew were busy with the navigation of the boat, the passengers spent their time as best they could. Conversation was one of the mainstays of river travel; and among the variety of people who usually traveled in this fashion, it seldom proved monotonous. Games of a more practicable sort were indulged in, and it was a common pastime to stand on the foredeck or boiler housing and shoot at geese or ducks on the river. When there was no danger from Indians or wild animals in a particular vicinity, some passengers, in order to relieve the tedium of the trip, disembarked at the beginning of an especially winding or torturous stretch of water, cut across the open country at a more or less leisurely pace, and rejoined the boat farther upstream when it came along some time later. River travel was nothing if not slow.

By far the most anticipated diversion, however, was the arrival of the steamer at one of the trading posts stationed along the way. Of even more interest to the occupants of these remote depots, the arrival of a company of travelers from the East provided the occasion for celebration. Often the man in charge of a post, along with several of his employees, would drop downriver two or three days ahead of time to meet the boat. When nearing the post, salutes would be exchanged, colors displayed, and the passengers would throng the deck to greet the motley crowd which lined the bank in something of the manner described by George Catlin upon his arrival at Fort Union in 1832.

Maximilian spent nearly a year along the upper reaches of the Missouri collecting plant and animal specimens, taking notes, and observing the daily activities of the buffalo hunting and fur trading tribes of that country.

"Though the main object of my journey," he explains, "namely, to pass some time in the chain of the Rocky Mountains, was defeated by unfavorable circumstances, I should have been able, but for the loss of my collections, to

communicate many new observations, especially in the department of zoology, which are now more or less deficient."

But while regretting the disappearance of his cherished specimens, most of which were lost overboard during the return voyage through carelessness on the part of one of the crew, nevertheless, he states that the drawings which artist Karl Bodmer made will prove to be of lasting importance: perhaps the most significant result of his exhausting excursion up the mighty Missouri.

Neither Catlin nor Maximilian ventured much beyond Fort Union where yet another post existed at the mouth of the Marias River. Named Fort Piegan, the American Fur Company had erected this depot only the year before the *Yellowstone* made its first voyage upriver. The Blackfoot Indians went on a rampage during the summer of 1832 and burned Piegan to the ground even while Catlin was visiting at Fort Union. A new fort soon replaced Piegan at Brule Bottoms about six miles above the Marias junction. Named Fort McKenzie by its founder, David Mitchell, this post stood as the northernmost stronghold of the American Fur Company on the Missouri until Fort Benton was established in 1846 as the uppermost headquarters for steamboat navigation on the river—and jumping off place for the gold fields of western Montana.

Throughout this period, the Missouri continued to serve as a vital east-west artery, facilitating the United States' penetration of the continent until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Even when progress was not made upon the river itself, westbound traffic kept as close as possible for hundreds of miles to its banks or those of its principal tributaries. Travelers en route to Oregon and California followed this route during the 1840's and 50's. Government agents, soldiers, and private travelers of all sorts continued to visit the Upper Missouri country during this same period.

The annual trip to the forts of the Upper Missouri in 1843 was made by a steamer called the *Omega*, among whose passengers was the artist, John James Audubon. Another boat called



Trading on the Missouri, oil painting by William Cary, left, describes what was probably a typical scene along the river during the first half of the last century. From an original work in the Gilcrease collection.

the *Nimrod* made the voyage in 1844 carrying, among other things, a cargo of contraband whiskey—an item considered by the traders of that region as indispensable to their business.

The record distance for a steamer navigating the upper waters of the Missouri had been made by the *Assiniboine* in 1833-34, and it was not until 1853 that a vessel named *El Paso* beat that distance when it reached the mouth of the Milk River which joins the Missouri nearly 150 miles above Fort Union. Finally, in 1860, the *Chippewa* and the *Key West* arrived at the distant location of Fort Benton in the present state of Montana, and in so doing reached a point farther from the sea by continuous water travel than any other boat in America had gone up to that time.

Even as these new records were being made, however, travel on the western rivers gradually was being supplemented by the overland routes to Oregon and Santa Fe. When the transcontinental railroad joined the country east and west, river traffic began to fall off sharply, replaced at last by the faster rail travel through the Rockies and south to California.

One of the last adventuring artists to make his way to the Upper Missouri region at this time was also one of the youngest: twenty-year-old William de la Montagne Cary, who, with two equally youthful companions, set out from New York City in the spring of 1861 to explore the western wilds. With no commission in hand and no particular destination in mind—and with little else to support them in such an undertaking except their age and exuberance—these three young men ventured

up the Missouri to Forts Union and Benton, and continuing across the mountains to Oregon, eventually reached San Francisco, returning home by boat via Panama, the Caribbean, and the Atlantic coast.

A remarkable journey in those days, and a trip that scarcely could be equaled today, Cary and his companions saw the Missouri frontier as it was in its final days of untamed nature, recording some of the last observations of life as it was yet lived among the Indian settlements and trading posts along the Upper Missouri. Among the three of them they left a number of interesting narratives, especially with regard to travel on the western waterways and mountain trails of the Far Northwest. Cary, in particular, produced an extensive documentary of his travels which, together with other sketches, paintings, and notes executed on subsequent excursions to the scenes of his first adventure, is now preserved among the collections of the Gilcrease Institute: a catalog which represents, as well, almost all the known works of this artist from this period in his life which survive to the present day.

Cary, like many an artist before him ventured westward beyond the frontier simply to see what he could see—or as one of his companions, W. H. Schieffelin, recalls in his own later accounts:

"The reading of the history of the Lewis and Clark expedition and of James Fennimore Cooper's tales awakened in us a spirit of interest and desire for travel and adventure."

It might well be imagined what such an excursion must have meant to three youthful,

inexperienced travelers from the East with no purpose in view but adventure. Both Schieffelin and Cary in their notes and commentaries, many of which are preserved in the manuscripts files of the Gilcrease Library, make mention of, or go into great detail concerning, the happenings and mishaps that occurred on this trip. Scheiffelin's narrative of the excursion up the Missouri is especially entertaining considered in retrospect, although his account of western river-boat travel even in the 1860's does not suggest that this was the most luxurious way in which to travel.

Cary, however, remarks lightly concerning expected inconveniences, commenting that the frequent stops along the way gave them ample opportunity to try their hand at hunting.

"...there was always plenty of game hung on the lower deck of the boat," he says, "such as elk, buffalo, bear, duck, geese, and swans."

"The distance from St. Louis to Fort Benton is 3000 miles," reports Schieffelin in an article later printed in *Recreation Magazine* shortly before the turn of the century. "It took us about six weeks to make the trip traveling by day only. At night we made fast to the shore or in case of danger from hostile Indians anchored in the middle of the river. The vessels were loaded principally with goods for the trading posts in the far Northwest, there being but few passengers for that remote country in those days.

"The trip was in every way a most delightful one. The days were full of incident and adventure: now a snag, then a sandbar over which our boat was lifted by stilts which were part of the steamboat equipment and which operated like legs. We saw many Indians and wild animals but the nights were always quiet and restful."

Descriptions of elk and buffalo hunting are scattered here and there throughout this particular account, and it is almost impossible to imagine such a wilderness abounding with game of all kinds in what is now the north central United States. On several occasions Cary or another of the steamer's passengers endangered themselves in attempts to capture large game, for very few aboard the vessel were experienced frontiersmen or familiar with the rough life of the plains. Schieffelin's account of his shooting of his first elk indicates his

innocence of the ways of wild life, for in attempting to cut the throat of the fallen animal, it revived sufficiently to jump up and toss the young hunter some twenty feet from the spot where it had lain.

"Fortunately the elk was too badly hurt to follow up his advantage," he explains, "and I scrambled back to my gun, loaded up, and shot him dead. I doubtless owe my life to the fact that it was the spring of the year when the elk are hornless."

It was while traveling from Fort Union to Fort Benton that the most disastrous incident of the entire journey occurred. Arriving at Fort Union, Cary, Schieffelin, and E. N. Lawrence, third member of the team, had boarded the *Chippewa* for the next leg of the voyage upriver. This exchange was deemed necessary because of the low level of the water ahead, and the passengers crowded aboard the smaller stern wheeler.

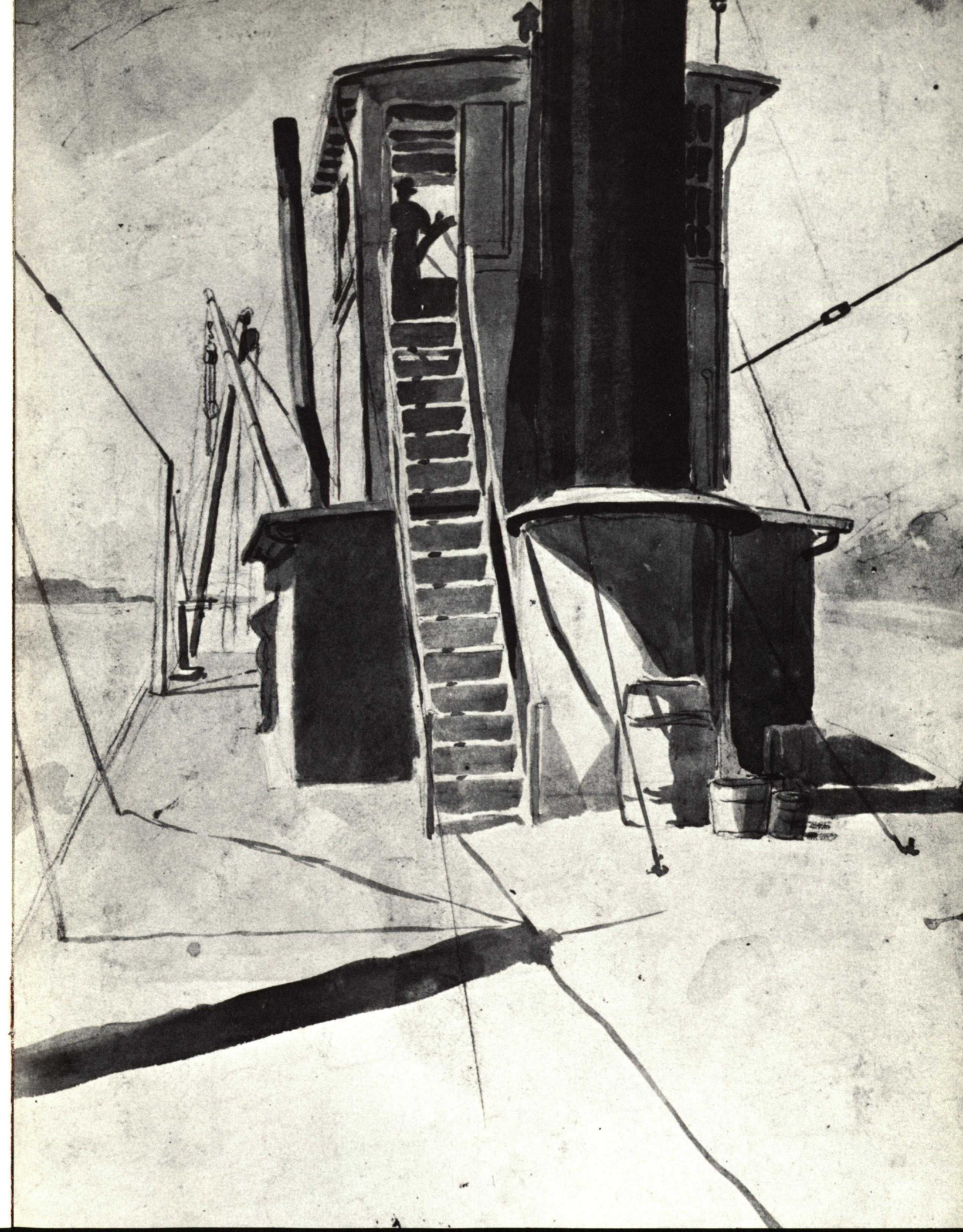
"This was very unlike the ease and luxury we had enjoyed on the larger boat, the *Spread Eagle*," comments Schieffelin, "where each had a stateroom to himself..."

Only a few days upstream from Fort Union, while most of the passengers were enjoying a smoke on deck one Sunday evening, a thirsty member of the crew lit a candle and went below among the stores where he attempted to break open a barrel of alcohol. As the liquid poured out, it was ignited by the candle flame; and in the conflagration that ensued both the unhappy man and his thirst went up in flames. The passengers and crew, left to their own desperate devices, deserted the burning vessel with considerable haste.

"All of us knew there were some 300 kegs of powder in the bow of the boat," remarks Schieffelin, "so we did not want to stay aboard long. A panic ensued...The shouts and screams of the people and the column of smoke and flame leaping up from the hold into the open hatchways were enough to shake the nerves of the bravest men.

"Several of us rushed to our staterooms," he continues, "grabbed our best guns and belts and prepared to escape at the best

William Cary's sensitive rendering of a pilot house on the deck of a Missouri River steamer is reproduced on the opposite page.





opportunity. The engineer stood at his post and ran the boat ashore."

And of the principal-in-charge, he remarks:

Our captain had the instinct of self-preservation strongly developed. He stood on the prow without a package of any kind in his hands and as soon as the boat got within six feet of land he leaped like a wild man. In doing so he pushed the frail little steamer out into the water again, but the engineer drove her up to the shore and held her there until all the passengers were safely off. Then he too went ashore.

...We took refuge behind some large cottonwood trees and watched the ill-fated craft float helplessly out into the stream. In about twenty minutes the fire reached the powder and the unlucky steamer went up in a cloud of smoke with a roar that must have startled the wild beasts for miles around.

Some of the wreckage could be seen floating down the river. We recognized a choice saddle, a bundle of clothes and some heavy blankets. Oh, how we shivered when we thought how cold we would be next fall for want of those heavy blankets and clothes! How we ached when we thought of the hundreds of miles we must ride on the bare hurricane decks of Indian cayuses and how we would long for those saddles!...Yet we knew there was no use crying over lost supplies, and the best we could do now was to do the best we could...

Thus were Schieffelin and his friends, passengers, and crew alike left stranded in the middle of nowhere, beached on the banks of the Missouri with only their own resourcefulness to aid and comfort them—miles from the nearest human settlement with the possible exception of an Indian encampment, which thought gave rise to more concern than hope.

"I had brought a pointer dog from St. Louis," adds Schieffelin as an after-thought. "He was said to be well-trained...but he liked to have his own way and was slow to obey orders when he did not see the necessity of it. This trait cost him his life, for when the *Chippewa* took fire he was lying on the upper deck and when I ran for my gun I called him to follow me. But he did not stir and after calling him three times I left him to his repose.

"That was the last I ever saw of him. He is, no doubt, in repose yet, but he must have been rudely disturbed for an instant when the boat blew up..."



Missouri deck hands on board the steamer **Fontanelli** are shown above in various attitudes of repose by artist William Cary. An original from the Gilcrease collection, this sketch is dated 1874.

The fate of the steamer **Chippewa** is shown in the illustration left by William Cary who has recorded the incident from out of his memory in vivid terms. Left stranded in the wilderness, Cary and his companions traveled overland to the headwaters of the Columbia and on to the Pacific. The wreck of the **Chippewa** remained visible for several years in the shallow waters of the Missouri.

Sketch by William Cary, 1874, entitled "Man at Tiller, Mackinac boat, Survey Party, 1874."



It is difficult today to measure the effect that Bodmer's views along the Missouri or Catlin's scenes of life on the western prairies may have had on the American public of their day. Yet it might be supposed that at least some of the reports of those who accompanied expeditions to the West in the nineteenth century helped open Eastern eyes to its wonders and perhaps encouraged interest in its future settlement.

Today, of course, the Missouri is intersected at many points by highway and railroad bridges, its waters contained and its mighty flow interrupted by hydroelectric dams. Gone are the earth lodge villages of the Indians along its banks, as well as most of the wild and desolate scenery described by those who embarked upon its muddy waters. Only their reports survive, preserving a rich commentary on conditions characteristic of one of the most boisterous periods in this nation's westward progress.

Audubon's *Western Journal*, since reprinted in part or whole in a number of more recent publications, offers the reader a personal account of his experiences west of the Mississippi. Rudolph Frederick Kurz's documentary of his sojourn in America between the years of 1846 and 1852 is less known, perhaps. His journals reside today in a museum in his native Berne, Switzerland, along with numerous sketches and paintings. Another collection of fourteen watercolors and four pen-and-ink or wash drawings are preserved by the Gilcrease Institute, possibly the only representation of this artist's work to be found in the United States at the present time.

Of the numerous studies William Cary made in the course of his trip up the Missouri in 1861, many are preserved in the archives or art storage area of the Gilcrease Institute. In particular, his studies of riverboat men, trappers, and traders are deserving of attention, describing as they do a breed of men almost

totally extinct in this mechanized age. Not all of his work relates to his first western adventure, however, for Cary made at least two more trips beyond the frontier: one in 1867 when he traveled to Fort Riley, Kansas, and a second trip up the Missouri in 1874 when he was invited by a friend to accompany the U. S. Government's survey of the northern boundary between the United States and Canada. Cary was by no means an official member of the survey team, actually joining it upon its return.

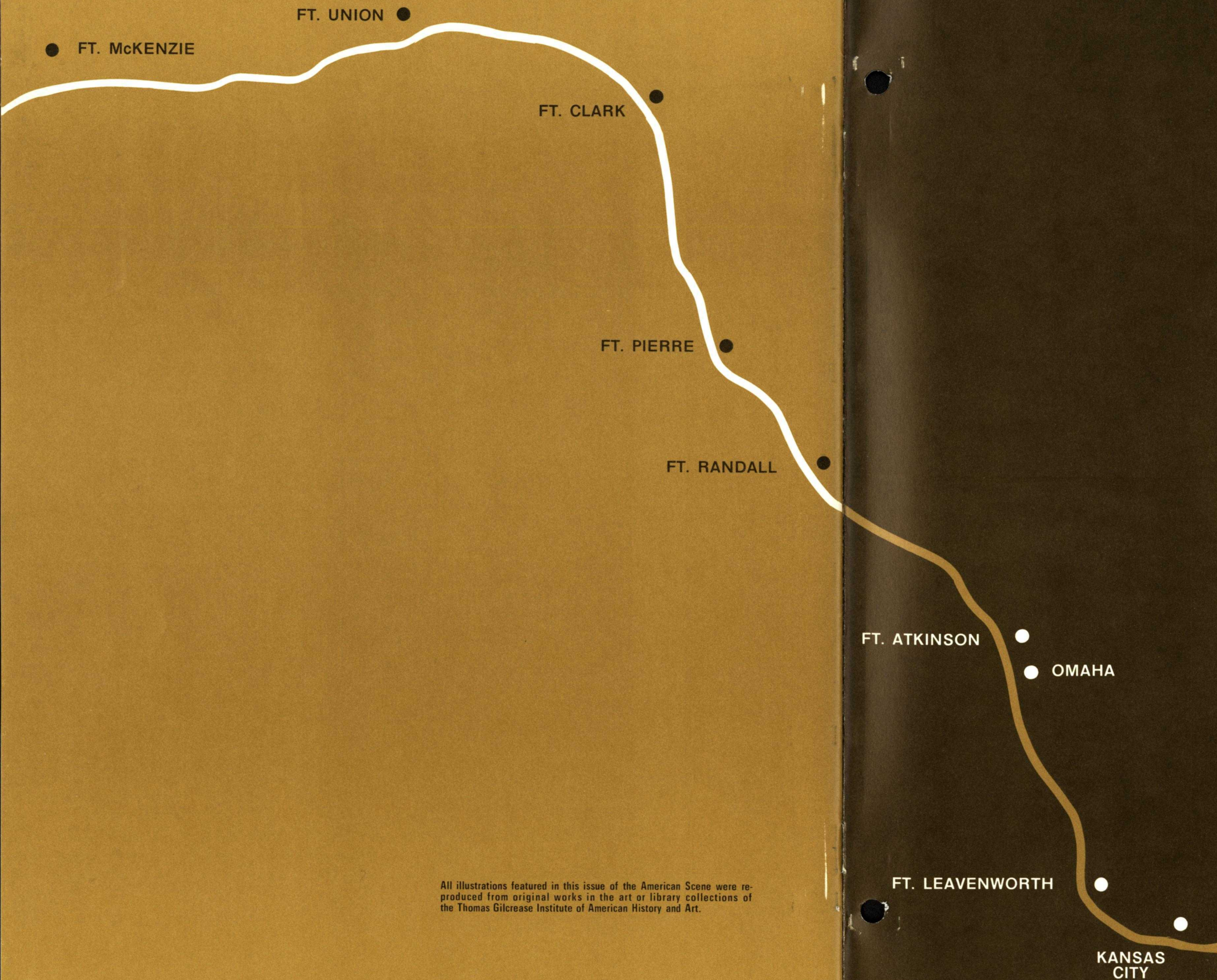
"I had received a letter from Major Twining to meet them at St. Paul, Minnesota, and accompany the expedition of the Northwest Boundary Survey," he relates in a manuscript filed in the Gilcrease Library, "but as I had the invitation too late to make the necessary arrangements with the party before they left Bismarck...I followed on the next steamboat up the Missouri."

Gilcrease is fortunate to have so many of the field sketches executed by Cary after joining the government survey on its return from the northern reaches of the Missouri. A very large canvas depicting the return of this team is a much later work based upon these and other studies to which the artist frequently referred when producing his finished studio pieces back home in New York. The subject matter of most of Cary's pictures, many of them done apparently between 1861 and 1875, ranges from that of Indian life on the western plains to scenes of pioneering progress and settlement in the days following the end of the Civil War.

Excepting his pencil studies, the bulk of his work, like that of many of his contemporaries, leaves something to be desired from an aesthetic standpoint, perhaps. Nevertheless, they present a picture of frontier life and conditions that provides the historian and gallery viewer alike with a broad prospect descriptive of an earlier and more primitive American West. □



The oil painting entitled **Return of the Northern Boundary Survey Party** by William Cary was done almost twenty-five years after the event witnessed by the artist during his last trip up the Missouri River in 1874. The Gilcrease Institute preserves several of Cary's earlier sketches of the scene, however, executed at the time and on the spot, which doubtless were used in preparing the large canvas reproduced above.



All illustrations featured in this issue of the American Scene were reproduced from original works in the art or library collections of the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art.

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