

Wyandots journey from St. Louis to Kansas

Transcribed by Darren English

The emigrants disembarked at St. Louis on July 24, and boarded two Missouri River boats. The following is a letter from Rev. James Wheeler:

July 28, 1843 from a Missouri Riverboat

"Brother Elliott, Before leaving St. Louis, the Chiefs visited the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, residing in the city, in order to report themselves as being on their new homes in the West and to have a friendly interview, and to receive such instructions and information as he might wish to give them. Their visit, however, did not meet with that friendly greeting which had been anticipated, and they, thinking 'he no very good agent' without much ceremony, took their leave.

Ever since we first entered the Mississippi, it has been a matter of frequent remark among the Indians, that the water was very bad. In broken English they would observe, 'He no good river; she too much mud.' On coming, however, to the junction of the two rivers, twenty miles above St. Louis, their notions in regard to the Mississippi changes; but in reference to the Missouri they look at it as a very queer kind of river. Before coming to the meeting of the rivers, the boat passes to the Mississippi side, where the water, un-mingled with that of the other, is clear, and so far up as we can see is very placid; but the Missouri in a foaming manner comes rushing in, and having muddied itself in its angry movements, seems a very unfit companion for blending its turbulent waters with those of the purer, milder stream.

In some of its freaks, it will throw a volume of its white muddy water under the clear water of the Mississippi for some distance, when on a sudden it will rise to the surface and throw up its muddy foam almost resembling the boiling of a pot; while the Indians, with their accustomed 'Uugh! Uugh!' start back astonished at that singular operation. The apparently mad and turbulent disposition of the waters is surely enough to excite the curiosity of anyone, and perhaps no other river in the world gives its navigators so much difficulty to find its channels as does the Missouri. It is constantly changing; in some places where the channel has lately been, there are now impassable barriers of sand; in other places where they least expect to pass, is the only chance to get along; and in some others, where fruitful fields have been cultivated, steamboats are now running.

Having a desire to know how deep we could see in the water of the river, I took a glass tumbler, and placing a pin in the bottom, poured water into it until the pin could no longer be seen, when on measuring the depth, found it to be about a quarter of an inch. And now to say that from this muddy stream, heated by the sun of summer, we procure excellent water both for cooking and for drinking, a person unacquainted with the fact, might supposed we cared but little what we did say. Corn meal, wheat flour, or pulverized alum in proper quantities, will either of them, when put into a cask containing water, cause it to settle. But the best manner of purification is with eggs, using about one egg to a barrel of water. This is done by

beating it up, shell and all, adding a little water, and beating it again, then putting it into the cask filled with water: in a very short time it becomes completely clarified. Into this is put a cake of ice, and but few strangers could guess from whence was procured,

'So rich a treat,
For burning heat,
On a sultry summer day.'

Along the river banks, on either side, the signs of civilized life are 'few and far between.' St. Charles, twenty-five miles from the mouth of the Missouri, is a city of some note, but its importance I should judge to be, as yet, mostly in the future. But Jefferson City, one hundred and ten miles further up, I think must be about at its zenith. And is this the capital of the state of Missouri? A penitentiary and state-house is nearly all that can be seen of it. So far as I can see, there is no city, and no place for one. A few houses, on and among some scrubby looking bushes, which the citizens seem not to have sufficient energy to remove, constitute its adorning. The crowded cabins and decks of the steamboats, however, give us to understand that Missouri has inhabitants up here somewhere, or if it has not as yet, it will soon have; for there seems to be mighty drifting to the west.

A young man, a member of the nation, but the son of a white man, who had recently been reprieved from confinement in the penitentiary, made the announcement that now he is free; and commences by offering insults to the captain and steward of the boat. The chiefs immediately seize him, and having procured irons fasten him head and foot, with a determination to keep him in close confinement until they land at their place of destination. Very few Wyandots can be found who, when sober, will return an insult, though insults are offered them; and now, for one of their number to insult those who are treating them kindly, they appear to feel as a disgrace to their nation.

There is one thing that I can say for the Wyandots, which can be said, I think, for few other people; and that is, the four years that I have lived with them as their missionary, no sober person, and but few among those who were intoxicated, have ever spoken to me an unpleasant word.

The farther we proceed up the river, the more villages appear to present themselves to view. Booneville bids fair to become a place of importance. Brunswick too, at the mouth of Grand River, is quite a village. Lexington, the county seat of Lafayette county, is truly a city set upon a hill.

On the landing of the boat at a little village above Lexington, I had my mind waked up anew to the subject of intemperance. As usual, the people manifested a curiosity to come on board and see the Indians. Among the number my attention was fixed on one, who was evidently in the vale of poverty, hastening to a premature old age through dissipation. Feeling that a missionary ought to be ready to try to do good to all, I sought an opportunity to converse with him on the subject. He presently offered that he was expecting a talk from me; he said his name was W.M.B.; he asked if I did not recollect him? He was one of my former associates. I looked at him, but for every feature in his countenance was so changed that it had never

entered my mind that this was William

_____ I had known him in the days of his rising into manhood. He was learned, and with a laudable zeal was drinking at the fountain of science. He was surrounded by a large circle of acquaintances, and respected by all that knew him. He was young, but a spirit of emulation prompted him in aspiring after honorable distinction. With prospective enjoyments scattered so thickly before him in the path of life, he deemed himself happy, but sought to heighten that happiness by a temperate indulgence at the social bowl.

He argued, as others argue, that a little could do him no harm. For fourteen years I had not seen him. I had hoped, however, that the genius of temperance had kindly embraced him, and having exposed the fallacy of his arguments, he had obtained some place both honorable and useful among his fellow men. But to now find him a gray-headed and apparently broken down old man, with paralyzed energies and clad in rags, I could not help inquiring again if this really was William _____. He inquired after his people; and after having given him all the information I could respecting them, I asked what I should say to them in reference to him. He commenced to tell me, but the boat being about to start he had to leave, and I was left to reflect on the bewitching and self-destroying ravages of rum. I endeavored, so far as I could, to make the above and other examples lessons of profit to the Indians by conversing with them on the subject. Soon, however, it is announced that we are in sight of our place of landing, where, having arrived, we are happy to consider our journey at an end. You may expect to hear from us again before long through a letter to Brother Ames.

Yours affectionately,

James Wheeler

On Board the Boat

July 28, 1843