

## AN UPPER MISSISSIPPI EXCURSION OF 1845

IN 1823 THE STEAMBOAT "Virginia," first to ascend the Mississippi to Fort Snelling, carried supplies to that frontier post. A dozen years later George Catlin, the painter of the American Indian, excited over western scenery, wrote enthusiastically about a "Fashionable Tour" for America made possible by the rapid development of the river steamers.<sup>1</sup> By the end of another decade excursions from St. Louis to the Falls of St. Anthony were no longer a rarity, but St. Louisans and visitors to the West did not find their interest or pleasure dulled by the knowledge that every week or two one might leave on a vacation tour upstream. In June and July, 1845, for instance, at least four steamboats took parties of pleasure to Fort Snelling and the falls.

Early in the summer advertisements in the St. Louis newspapers called the "attention of those who would escape from the heat, toil and anxieties of the city, for a few days, and spend the interval in reviewing some of the richest scenery in the west" to trips of the "St. Croix," the "War Eagle," the "Iowa," and the "Time." All were bound for the Falls of St. Anthony on the upper Mississippi. Tourists who made the trip sometimes reported their experiences, contributing to the St. Louis papers articles bearing such titles as "An Hour among the Winnebagoes."<sup>2</sup> A visit to the Falls of St. Anthony doubtless was responsible for an enthusiastic

<sup>1</sup> George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, 2: 129 (London, 1842). Catlin's remarks are quoted by Theodore C. Blegen in an article on "The 'Fashionable Tour' on the Upper Mississippi," *ante*, 20: 378.

<sup>2</sup> *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), June 23, 30, July 7, 1845; *Weekly Reveille* (St. Louis), July 21, 1845. For general accounts of steamboating on the upper Mississippi, see George B. Merrick, *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi* (Cleveland, 1909) and William J. Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* (Iowa City, 1937).

description of their wild beauty that appeared in the *Weekly Reveille* of St. Louis for July 14, 1845. The most interesting account of a river excursion that found its way into the columns of a St. Louis newspaper in that season, however, resulted from the trip of the "Time" late in July. Among its passengers from Nauvoo northward was a health-seeker who reported his impressions of the upper Mississippi in eleven letters to the *Reveille*. These communications, which are signed "A Dead Man," are the basis for the present article.<sup>3</sup>

The correspondent who chose to write over this facetious signature has not been definitely identified, but it is likely that he was Joseph Lemuel Chester, an eastern journalist who later achieved a reputation as a genealogist. It is known that Chester arrived in St. Louis before the end of June, 1845, a sick man, for the *Reveille* declared on the thirtieth that the friends and readers of "Julian Cramer," the pseudonym under which Chester usually wrote, "will be glad to learn that he has arrived safely in this city in improved health." Chester was sufficiently alive to contribute several pieces to the *Reveille*.<sup>4</sup> As a sick man, he might logically have made the trip from St. Louis to the Falls of St. Anthony, for the upper Mississippi country was receiving wide

<sup>3</sup> The letters appear in the *Reveille* from August 4 to 25, 1845. They are quoted here from files of the newspaper in the possession of the Missouri Historical Society and the Mercantile Library, both of St. Louis, and the Newberry Library of Chicago. For assistance in the preparation of this article, the writer is indebted to these libraries as well as to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Washington University of St. Louis, the National Youth Administration, and his wife.

<sup>4</sup> That the sick Chester was the literary "Dead Man" cannot be proved. Of half a dozen newspapers published in St. Louis in 1845, files of only two are available. Others might have carried stories about Chester or the "Time." For biographical sketches of Chester, see the *Dictionary of American Biography*, 4:58-60, and the *Dictionary of National Biography*, 10:201-203. He published his first book over the signature of "Julian Cramer" in 1843. A poem signed thus and dated at "St. Louis, Mo., June 26th, 1845," appears in the *Reveille* for June 30, and the same paper in its issue for July 7, 1845, refers to "'Julian Cramer', of the N. Y. True Sun (Mr. Joseph L. Chester,) at present on a visit to St. Louis."

acclaim as a health resort in the middle decades of the past century. It was natural also that Chester's experience as a journalist should whet his interest in a remote region that had been given considerable space in eastern newspapers.

Whoever he was, the "Dead Man," accompanied by a physician, left St. Louis on July 23, 1845, aboard the "Mendota," Robert A. Reilly, master.<sup>5</sup> A few days later the boat was stranded in the Lower Rapids below Nauvoo, and the travelers were obliged to continue their journey with Captain William H. Hooper on the "Time," which left St. Louis on July 25 and succeeded in making its way through the rapids.<sup>6</sup> The letters which the "Dead Man" dispatched to the *Reveille* while traveling on the "Mendota" and the "Time" are not admirable for their literary finish. There is in them, especially the earlier ones, a truculence, an incoherence, a verbosity, that one may attribute charitably to the illness of the writer and the heat and haste in which they were written. The value of this correspondence lies in the detailed account of the pleasure excursion once so popular and in the report on the upper Mississippi in the summer of 1845. Regardless of lumpy style and the prejudices of the writer, his sketches form an interesting bit of social history.

To his experiences on the "Mendota" the correspondent devoted his first two letters. The first he dated in anticipation, "Among the 'Saints' July 25th, 1845."<sup>7</sup> It reads:

DEAR MOURNERS:— Having been gravely pronounced, by two city doctors and divers anxious friends, a "dead man", I took my corpse

<sup>5</sup> Reilly commanded the "Mendota" in the Galena-St. Peter's trade in 1844 and in the St. Louis-Galena trade in the following year, according to Merrick, *Old Times*, 259, 280, 281, 294. In 1846 Reilly was captain of the "Atlas," and in 1849, of the "Minnesota." The "Mendota" is listed among the departing boats in the *Missouri Republican* of July 24.

<sup>6</sup> For notices of the "Time," see the *Missouri Republican*, July 18, 24, 26, and the *Reveille*, July 20, 1845. A sketch of Hooper appears in Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*, 446. The *Republican* gives Hooper's initials as "W. W.," but both Petersen and Merrick give them as "W. H."

<sup>7</sup> *Reveille*, August 4, 1845. The writer refers to the settlement of Latter-day Saints or Mormons at Nauvoo, Illinois.

on board the Mendota, as you are aware, where I must say, thanks to the tearful attentions of Capt. Reilly, Mr. Laveille<sup>8</sup> and other afflicted friends, my body has been taken the best care of;—in fact, it is the general opinion that I will *keep* for some time to come. I need not say that this prospect is highly gratifying to one in my state, and that I consider myself as being laid up in lavender.

It is astonishing how much a “dead man” may enjoy himself, released from the cares of life, and what a lively interest he takes in matters which, under the pressure of *existence*, his mind would have forbid a thought to! From the moment when I felt myself among the departed, a sort of humanized celestialty descended upon my heart; the evening breeze, the darkening eddies of the river, the cloudy palaces of the west—even the preparations for supper—had a charm, and I felt as if, stomach or no stomach, I should yet do pretty well—for a “dead man.”

The moon lighted our path across the mouth of the Missouri, and no doubt an illumination no less dazzling beacons us towards Alton; but not feeling inclined for a *wake* this night, I composed myself to rest, after due precautions against the mosquitoes, without seeing the famed city.

“To die—to sleep! To sleep—perchance to dream!  
Aye, there’s the rub”—

And there’s the *scratch*, also!—for, albeit the Mendota’s berths are the widest, and her mosquito nets are of the closest, yet did the sundry rest-disturbers,

“With red-hot spits, come hissing in upon me!”

until breaking a toe against the bottom shelf, and bumping my head against the top partition I uttered divers deadly things as natural as life. . . .

In my former *State* (Missouri.—Edr.) I had heard a great deal about Quincy, Ill. If I had the least life in me I should probably go into fits about it, for, reaching the landing between 11 and 12 on Thursday night, I carried my body up along one of the magnificent avenues which, cut through the rocky bluffs, lead to the beautiful table land on which is built the town. Every thing was bathed in a

<sup>8</sup>This was probably one of the sons of Joseph C. Laveille, architect, who settled in St. Louis in 1818 and died there in 1842. His four sons were Eugene, Theodore, Bertrand, and Auguste.

sheen of silver,—the handsome square, court house, hotel, and the spreading vistas on every side of fine tall stores and dwellings! The streets are magnificently laid out at right angles, and, so far, the buildings are every way worthy of them; as far as my experience of the west goes, there is no place where “a dead man” would rather spend his moonlight nights in than Quincy.

“But hark! the cock,—the herald of the morn.”

Friday morning; I find that we are “lightening,” at the rapids, below Nauvoo, arrived at which place I shall carry my body to the “Temple,” and afterwards inquire for a post-office.<sup>9</sup> The river is falling fast; this is the last trip Capt. Reilly makes in the Mendota, he being summoned to superintend the building of a new boat, which every “dead man” is bound to hope may be worthy of him.<sup>10</sup> Adieu — “we meet at Philippi.”

“A DEAD MAN.”

Progress upstream was not so rapid as he had expected; the reasons become clear in the second letter, more accurately dated than the first.

KEOKUK, July 26th, 1845.<sup>11</sup>

DEAR CORPORALS:—Even a “dead man”, I find, is not released from disappointment! I wrote you, last, with the full expectation of being among “the Saints” in an hour or two, and lo! here we are still, stuck fast in the middle of the rapids below Nauvoo, notwithstanding our having “lighted” at Keokuk,—a broiling operation for the live souls engaged in it I assure you. One enormous negro deck hand was the admiration of all on board; stripped to his waist, his herculean, ebon bulk bathed in perspiration, he glistened in the sun like a figure of Atlas, cut in anthracite! The fellow seemed the very incarnation of power; his huge frame was wrapped and lapped in muscle, the play of which suggested the idea of his being enveloped in the folds of a boa constrictor. Still he toiled, his broad oily back shining under immense shoulder loads,—crushing burthens, apparently, but which he tossed from him with the indifference of a giant

<sup>9</sup> The Mormon Temple at Nauvoo was still in the process of construction in the summer of 1845. It was dedicated in April, 1846, and was destroyed by fire in 1848.

<sup>10</sup> The new boat apparently was the “Wiota,” built in 1845 and owned by Captain Reilly, Corwith Brothers, and William Hempstead of Galena.

<sup>11</sup> *Reveille*, August 4, 1845.

and the playfulness of a child. Every one was interested in the fellow's figure and good humor, but, looking in his face, sympathy assumed no higher character. He was thorough African; no spark of intellect lit up his heavy face and deficient forehead; he was in his proper state, the cheerful dependent upon a superior race; as the slave, that negro was something to regard and even *respect*; as aught beyond, he would be an animal to guard against.

This morning, the *Fortune* and the *Monona* have passed down, reporting an utter scarcity of water above — pleasing intelligence to one in my situation, suggesting, as it does the great probability of my not seeing that promised paradise, St. Peters!<sup>12</sup> We are within ten miles of Nauvoo, however, which some few of us think of travelling “overland” to, where, if the modern Mohammed have but left his steed, *El Borak*, in the stable, I may yet reach the seventh heaven of Fort Snelling.

When it became certain that the heavily laden “Mendota” could not pass the rapids, the “Dead Man” and his companion decided to drive from Keokuk to Montrose and thence to ferry over to Nauvoo. The “Time” was expected in a few hours and they could reship for the Falls of St. Anthony. The third letter describes his overland passage.

DAVENPORT, July 28, 1845.<sup>13</sup>

MY SOMETIME FRIENDS: — Impatient of my mortal *coil* — and there was any number of them about the Mendota, — from a chain cable to the lead line, and all in a *snarl*, as well as the passengers, the one from constant employment, the other at finding themselves back again at Keokuk after an afternoon and night passed aground on the rapids, — impatient of further delay my body, with its attached and pensive companion and attendant from St. Louis, just marched ashore, arm in arm one after the other, large as life, chartered the back seats in a

<sup>12</sup> The district about the mouth of the Minnesota or St. Peter's River was known as St. Peter's; more specifically the name was applied to the village of Mendota. The “Dead Man” was indulging in a pun. On its arrival at St. Louis on July 27, the “Monona” reported that the “Mendota” was “hard aground at Lower Rapids, and will probably be compelled to re-ship. A little over three feet of water is reported on said Rapids.” *Missouri Republican*, July 28, 1845.

<sup>13</sup> *Reveille*, August 11, 1845.

light wagon, and daringly set out across the country (Iowa side) for Nauvoo, there to await the "Time," (steam boat,) expected up in some few hours—*light* "at that," the natural *heaviness* of a "pleasure trip" being as much as it would be safe to carry at this stage of water.

It was a day "made on purpose" for a ride; a partial veil of clouds and a breeze from the north, that we drank in, as it were, till eye and cheek gave evidence of our draughts. There is a fashion of straw hats peculiar to the neighborhood of Nauvoo; (a few of these hats have found their way to St. Louis,) they are *built* of broad plaits of common straw, their immense leaves sustained by "hog-chains" passing over the crown, as these strengthening links (so called) do from stem to stern of the steam boats. The next noticeable peculiarity was the height of the corn; and the next, the capital condition of the cattle;—every thing seemed to be thriving, and the new and spreading farms along the road gave evidence that the advantages of the country are fully appreciated. Iowa, in a few years, will be a garden of beauty and fertility. Our road lay along back about three miles from the river, and admiring the shifting shadows on the prairie, the excellence of the road, the unusually comfortable appearance of the cabins—above all, the *gout* with which our driver related to a friend who sat with him a bowie knife and pistol scrape, which had recently "come off" somewhere—we finally struck off towards the river again, and reaching the bluff, Nauvoo, the Temple, the glorious curve of the river, and the rich and spreading "bottom" beneath, on the Iowa side, flashed upon our vision, calling forth the most unaffected expressions of surprise and pleasure. I have never seen a lovelier prospect in all my rounds, either dead or alive! It is worth while being laid up at Keokuk to enjoy the ride and scene I mention. There stands, in the distance, the Mormon monument, (particulars hereafter,) crowning a vast slope studded with dwellings down to the river, which, in its bold and ample bend, almost encircles the site of the town. The ground taken up by the tenants and their surrounding corn-patches is immense; from our distant stand it seemed like a recent "clearing," the stumps not yet uprooted. One only object rose aloft, thrice striking from its situation and its singleness—the Temple! The view beneath us, though less striking, was no less lovely—a magnificent "bottom," bounded by a semi-circle of hills, and glorious in its garb of gold and emerald. There is not such a

site for a city as that at Nauvoo on any of the western rivers, and he who selected it — impostor, martyr, rogue or what not — had an eye for the beautiful! — the site of the "Temple" is a still further proof of it. [The opinions of "a dead man" with regard to the architectural *taste* displayed in this building, moreover, will be apt to surprise many a live one.]<sup>14</sup>

Descending the bluff, we drove to the Montrose ferry, chose a skiff instead of the *horse-boat*, (thought there were "no more left,") and off we glided, our oars marring the musical ripples which played upon the surface of the stream. . . .

The latter part of the Davenport letter and most of the next one — which was dated "Upper Mississippi River," July 29, 1845, appeared in the *Reveille* for August 11, and purported to describe a "Sunday among the 'Saints'" — were given over to a prejudiced, heavily flippant comment on the Latter-day Saints or Mormons. The travelers stopped at the Nauvoo Mansion, formerly the home of Joseph Smith, the Mormon leader, and there they "had the satisfaction, hour after hour through the afternoon, of witnessing the steamy efforts made by our impatiently expected boat, the *Time*, to free herself from the rapids some miles below the town, where she had grounded, and which, in another spot, had put an end to the upward trip of our late boat, the *Mendota*." At last, the "Dead Man" reported, "The *Time*, thanks to the indefatigable exertions of Captain Hooper . . . worked her way up the rapids; with what joy we got on board of her, and what an extraordinary scene presented itself when we did so! Of this anon; at present I lack *life* to describe it." The "Time" had overtaken the "Mendota" and taken on its passengers. The boat was crowded, but the crowd was interesting to the "Dead Man." The next letter is devoted to these people who, fortunately for him, were not all going to the Falls of St. Anthony.

<sup>14</sup> The statement in brackets was supplied by the editor of the *Reveille*. The leader of the Latter-day Saints in the founding of Nauvoo in 1839 was Joseph Smith.



UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER, July 29, 1845.<sup>15</sup>

DEAR DAY-BREAKERS:—Carpet bag in hand, my poor half-starved body (I had swallowed nothing since 1, P. M., . . .) struggled into the illuminated cabin of the *Time*, with certain famished others, about nine o'clock in the evening, and my first regalement was a mass of mattresses in one end, and a denser mass of proposed occupants in the other. The *Time* was absolutely alive with legs. . . . Captain Hooper (you will know him by an exceedingly well-fitting pair of black whiskers and pants,) had had an "awful time" in getting over the rapids, and a no less "awful time" awaited him in the disposition of his extra passengers, the Mendota having emptied herself into him; but, like a true "river man," he undertook to "put us through," and he did it. In the twinkling of a *mattress* a *sixth* table was spread; the miraculous "loaves and fishes" again made their appearance; the best *bar* on any western steam boat furnished *really* good cigars—and summer airs, quiet stars and the hurricane deck invited us until *bed* time. Even to "a dead man's" relief, the mosquitoes had disappeared, (we slept without a bar, the previous night, in Nauvoo,) and we took a few hours of "the balmy" on the floor, without knocking our noses off. At breakfast time we had an opportunity of ascertaining the quality as well as the number of our travelling companions, and my especial friend, the medical man having charge of my body, who is fastidious, somewhat, in his tastes and likings, relieved my mind of any possible apprehension by declaring that they "seemed to be of the right kind." Besides the usual number on their way east by the Galena and Chicago route, there was a "fishing crowd" for Davenport, a "way" crowd for everywhere, and a large "pleasure" crowd for the Falls of St. Anthony, made up of divers city worthies, and a couple of highly respectable families from New Orleans; among the latter, Mrs. Steele, the accomplished lady and artist, who, after a winter passed in copying the features of the *Orleanois*, thought it best to refresh her eye by sketching the (perhaps) more inspiring features of Nature, as displayed by the "Father of Waters" in the neighborhood of the Falls.<sup>16</sup> Mrs. S. was in

<sup>15</sup> *Reveille*, August 11, 1845.

<sup>16</sup> Mrs. A. Steele, a native of western New York, was in St. Louis on her way to New Orleans in January, 1845, according to the *New Era* of St. Louis for January 4. The editor describes her as a highly accomplished and intelligent woman "with a genius for seizing and fixing

St. Louis for a short time last fall, it may be remembered, and I am happy to hear that it is her intention to return *there*, after a visit to Chicago. Bloomington, Burlington — the scores of towns and settlements that are rising, born of a day, as might be said, along these noble shores, (Iowa particularly) — what can be said of them, except that they are the *suggestions*, to every mind, of the glorious destiny which is to crown the west, and the sound of whose triumphal march already rings within all ears. The Iowa shore can hardly be viewed with indifference by even the coldest eye and most mechanical nature; for if his heart is not warmed by the contemplation of an earthly paradise, his *calculation* is at least stirred by the idea of growing cities and profitable investments. The Upper Mississippi is “beautiful, exceedingly” — not so grand, thus far, as I had been led to expect, but filling the soul with calm and the eye with kindness.

Davenport! This desired spot of the “fishing crowd” we reached on Monday evening, just as a flood of splendor, streaming from the west, the happy sun’s “good night,” bathed every object, — Rock Island and its fort, the residence of the lamented Col. Davenport,<sup>17</sup> close by, Rock Island Town, on the Illinois shore, bluff, bottom, stream, and all — in beauty. This neighborhood is, indeed, all that it has been painted, but the deck of a steam boat is no place to contemplate its features from. The bluffs below the town afford the proper point of view, and the artist Wilde, formerly of St. Louis, has in a really fine drawing, given a lively idea of it.<sup>18</sup> The Hotel at Davenport is a very large and well adapted brick building; it is already a place of great resort, and such changes are proposed in its management, &c., as must make it known through the whole Southwest. Everything conspires to make this place “a place” essentially; the hunting, fishing, cool airs, and lovely scenery; Rock Island alone, with its groves and forests — boating privileges are open to all — would tempt the sun-parched, street-stifled citizen from any distance.

We are approaching Galena, “headed” by the stiffest “norther” that I have ever experienced in July. The heat of summer, I am assured, is already passed in this latitude; and from my own feelings, the expression of permanent and prevailing character, without which, you have not the *likeness* of the subject, but merely the effigy of that likeness.”

<sup>17</sup> George Davenport was murdered on July 4, 1845. For a biographical sketch, see the *Dictionary of American Biography*, 5:82.

<sup>18</sup> J. C. Wild published his *Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated* at St. Louis in 1841. Most of the accompanying text was by Lewis F. Thomas.

I can well believe it. The nerve of *November* impels my steps along the "hurricane deck," while the appetite of an ostrich makes the missing of a seat at the first table a positive affliction. "Talk of the devil, they say," there goes the tea bell; my provident medical friend is fighting with a gentleman from the "diggins" for my chair;—hold on, Doctor,—adieu friends.

"A DEAD MAN."

The sixth letter was written from Galena on July 30.<sup>19</sup> The writer was happy to report that two-thirds of the passengers had debarked for Chicago. "This Galena is a strange looking town," he wrote; "it seems as if it had run 'up a creek' in a devil of a fright, and was now stopping to take breath only, it being yet too flurried to gather itself up in decent order." Although it was not until they were on the return trip that the passengers were allowed enough time to inspect the lead mines, the *Reveille* of August 18 ran the "Dead Man's" account of "A Drive through 'The Diggings'" as his seventh letter.

REVEILLEURS:—My last was from Galena, and the Falls of Saint Anthony have since hummed within my ear; yet, having found no means of forwarding my interesting "*pencillings*," I will, now, despatch "The Diggings"—as having been visited in upward order.

I mentioned the state of alarm in which Galena had, apparently, hid herself away from the world! I found her, on my return, precisely in the same flurry;—houses running eagerly up precipitous hills, and hiding their gable ends in declivitous hollows; chimneys peeping suspiciously from holes in the ground, and yawning cellars, into which neighboring garrets seemed anxious to cast themselves. It is the most eccentric looking place in the world, and, as for the inhabitants, they are equally headlong; *quick-silver* not *lead* should be their commodity; at any rate, they are quick enough in transforming the latter into the former.

Mr. [W.C.E.] Thomas, the well-known editor of the *Gazette and Advertiser*, was kind enough to act as our guide,<sup>20</sup> and off we rattled

<sup>19</sup> *Reveille*, August 11, 1845.

<sup>20</sup> The *Northwestern Gazette and Galena Advertiser* was founded by Charles E. Loring and S. M. Bartlett of St. Louis in 1834. It later

towards the mining ranges, extending from half a mile back of the town to any travelable distance. The country is peculiar — presenting a complete maze of rolling hills and inextricably lost ravines and hollows. Near the town, however, the slopes are cultivated to a considerable extent, while the comfortable farm-house and stately villa tell their happy story of enterprise and prosperity. There is scarcely any timber, for useful purposes, about Galena; the wood for the furnaces is brought from some distance, on the Mississippi. We rode along, over lightly shrubbed hills, until the slopes presented simply a surface of short grass; every thing assumed a more barren appearance, and now the eye was attracted by what seemed to be an incalculable number of new-made graves! Commencing near the bottom the mounds of fresh turned earth neighbor each other, even to the top of every hill; — these were “the diggings.” Anon, figures were seen at work, seldom more than two together, hoisting, by means of a crank and roller, large buckets of red earth from what seemed the mouths of unfinished wells, while others, soiled by clay and shouldering pick or shovel, took their way to and from all sorts of odd-looking little huts — log, plank, and even *turf* — which appeared to stow themselves away in the hollows.<sup>21</sup>

We had reached a somewhat noted spot, “Vinegar Hill,” about seven miles from town, and a break neck whirl to its base brought us to the steam worked draining pump of Mr. Briggs, who “casts the water of the *hills*” for some miles around, by means of his engine; reclaiming, thus, valuable ranges of nearly abandoned diggings, and taking a percentage ( $33\frac{1}{3}$ ) of their yield for his remuneration. Mr. B. politely accompanies us to a rich “lead” (lode) which had been recently “struck” in the neighborhood. We descended a perpendicular shaft, of some thirty feet, through a hard clay, to the bed of mineral, following which, horizontal passages or “drifts” are in all cases, opened. We found the ore to exist in large lumps, — even masses, and embedded in clay. Thus found, the mineral is called “float ore,” and it gives the invariable promise of rich returns when

passed into the hands of Horace H. Houghton, who sold it to Thomas in 1843. In 1845, however, Houghton once more became editor and he was the sole owner in 1847. *History of Jo Daviess County, Illinois*, 433 (Chicago, 1878).

<sup>21</sup>For a general account of this region, consult Moses Meeker, “Early History of Lead Region in Wisconsin,” in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 6: 271–296.

the "crevice" or vein to which it is the lead is reached. Lighting our candles, the rays were reflected from a thousand shining points, above, around, beneath,—diamonds, as it were, peeping from their unworthy prison, and brightening at the prospect of release. [A f]ew blows of the pick would disengage large clay-colored lumps, which, again broken, strewed the floor with gems. Satisfied, as the discoverer has every reason to be, with this prospect of "a lead" we again crushed our hats and beclayed our coats rubbing against the side of the shaft, on our "haul up" to daylight. The ore, as found, is most rewardingly rich, generally yielding from 70 to 80 per cent.! It is absolutely *digging dollars*; and the infatuation—the restless, tireless searches of the less fortunate in their sanguine hopes—often realized—of striking upon instant fortune, is easily accounted for. Nearly all the successful miners commenced themselves, with pick and spade, "prospecting," (i.e.) turning up the surface of the hills for signs of mineral—persevering, often and often through years of toil and disappointment, and perhaps reaching wealth only with the threatened last stroke of their despairing spade. The histories of many wealthy men in Galena illustrate most vividly, the chance and change of fortune. Mining is said, after all, to be less a matter of experience than accident. "A fool for luck," is a favorite saying in "the diggings;" and the chance of a "*green Sucker*" (one from the southern part of the State) is, proverbially, a good one.

Returning to town by a road which embraces the most perilous succession of *ups* and *downs* ever travelled by Christian vehicle, curiosity was excited by the strange appearance of enormous chimneys, smoking like craters, seated on the very summits of divers of the hills, and looking as if the forges of the Cyclops must necessarily be situated within their shrouding bosoms. A few turns put an end to the mystery, by showing the connected buildings of the smelters; these furnaces require a very great draught, and the vast chimneys running up the slope of the hill, and finding a vent at the top secures [*sic*] this desideratum. The operation of smelting is very simple: the ore is broken, washed, and thrown upon a fire of wood and charcoal, which is rendered intense by the action of an enormous bellows, worked by horse or water power; the molten lead is caught in a large receiver, and from this the moulds are filled; the change from the ore to the "Pig" is instantaneous. From the furnaces we ascended an opposite hill, to visit a celebrated but now exhausted "lead". Nearly every

step was threatened by a pitfall; gophers, prairie dogs, and other western subteraneans, are noted for their "diggings," but here was an exhibition of their art on a scale as vast as curious. The amount of mineral obtained from this hill must have been incalculable! Enormous crevices are every where exposed, and the largest or "Buck lead," originally discovered by the Indians, and worked by a brother of Col. R. M. Johnson,<sup>22</sup> admits one through its yawning jaws into a positive cavern. The "drifts" show blackly and dangerously along its dim recesses, and, without lights, the visitor will hardly penetrate them. A few minutes peep, however, will convey an idea of the vast treasures which they have contained, and fill the mind with wonder at that exhaustless mineral wealth which, through the whole west, already lines the hills as agriculture will garb the valleys.

Mining is a strange, wild business! What stories of struggle, enterprize, defeat and wrong are connected with it! The land is still held by Government, and the thousand conflicting leases and pretences, now fill the Courts with litigation, as formerly they did the "diggings" with blood. Notwithstanding this, strange to say, the popular voice is opposed to a change of the system; they fear monopoly and an increase of rents, should the land be brought into the market. Droll stories are told of the myriad schemes, tricks and traps practiced in this region growing out of the various discoveries of "leads." Every success entails a lawsuit, and it is not long since a certain order of characters made a capital living, (if they didn't get *killed*) by taking "a fighting interest" in cases which promised unusual profit and, consequently, a corresponding amount of quarrelling. I don't know what particular percentage the "fighting interest" amounted to, but it was doubtless "handsome" as it enabled the persons so engaging, while the miners worked like moles, to live "like gentlemen," "licking" every one who interfered with them.

"A DEAD MAN."

The eighth letter was a shipboard fantasy, the writing of which apparently filled in part of the time of the *Reveille* correspondent on July 31; it contributes nothing to the

<sup>22</sup> The reference is to James Johnson, a son of Robert Johnson of Virginia and the elder brother of Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky. He purchased the right to work the Old Buck and Cave leads in 1822. Meeker, in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 274 n., 281.

record of the trip or description of the riverside.<sup>23</sup> The last three letters, however, are among the best of the series and form an excellent climax to his report of the trip.

UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER, August 1st, 1845.<sup>24</sup>

SOJOURNERS BELOW:—The sun loses his majesty, the moon and stars their splendor; the *Reveille*, at times, may be a “bore,” and most distinctly, the Mississippi, “upper” or “lower,” begins to flag in interest after a “week out;” consequently, the passage from Galena to Dubuque, and from Dubuque to *Prairie du Chien* excited but small interest. As a certain unmentionable poet, whose name is “writ in water,” expressed it, on his first visit, years ago, to the Mississippi, — when nine and ten day trips were every way creditable, —

“Day after day, some huge impression under  
Till vastness fails to be a sight of wonder.”

The sun of yesterday, however, as it grandly topped the superb hills which shelter the Garrison at Fort Crawford, dispelled the mists of *ennui*, revived our bechilled imaginations, and summoned to the “hurricane deck” as eager a throng as ever. We have a most agreeable party of ladies on board; Mrs. S[teele], the artist, with her rapid pencil, I have already mentioned, and then there are two most amiable families from New Orleans, including in their respective circles, that brightest source of all sweet fancy, a lovely girl.

However superb the Upper Mississippi, with its garnished slopes and tinting shadows may be, the traveller takes a renewed lease of beauty as he reaches the pavilioned bluffs of *Prairie du Chien*. These bluffs rising along the eastern “bottom” (whose rich carpet of green throws into such strong relief the whitened walls of the barracks,) I term “pavilioned,” from the fact, that the smooth, velvet-like turf which clothes their rocky frames, being *indented* (*not broken*) from their pagoda crowns to their base level, the diverging shadows give their glossy surface an appearance of sweeping folds, and, the military character of the spot suggesting further, the visiter fancies he sees the war tents of that Titan race whose spirits dwell about the mounds, and whisper of Behemoth and the flood. From this point the river,

<sup>23</sup> This letter appears under the title “A Million a Minute,” in the *Reveille*, August 18, 1845.

<sup>24</sup> *Reveille*, August 18, 1845.

stretching across from bluff to bluff, (from three to seven miles,) is fairly thronged with countless Islands, amid which, now enclosed in their mazes, now sweeping more freely on beneath some fortress-faced and craggy-browed old hill, the steamer winds impatiently her way. We now, too, were in the Indian country, — at least they still linger within it — and an occasional canoe with its tawny voyagers, a wigwam with its smoke, or a grave with its rude covering of sticks, served to keep the eye and imagination equally engaged. An Indian scout, who was employed by General Atkinson in the Black Hawk war, was, also, on board, during the whole day, and his peculiar anecdotes and comments, as we passed each spot of interest, lent zest and freshness to a “thrice told tale.” We are, this morning, a dense November fog having cleared away, — after, however, making amends for its depressing chilliness, by sportively wreathing the sungilt crags and hill tops in every imaginable disposition of vapor — we are approaching Lake Pepin. . . .

This letter the writer closed with a brief essay on the energy and perseverance, the tact and good humor, so indispensable to steamboat captains; the latter qualities he illustrated with an anecdote about Captain Hooper. In the next installment he described Lake Pepin and the Sioux village a few miles north.<sup>25</sup>

. . . Lake Pepin has its traditions — this broad expanse of water, spreading from bluff to bluff, unbroken by a single isle, and gathering in its depths the lesser floods, again to dispense them from its ample reservoir. A traveller from the Hudson, on entering this lake, would at once be struck with its resemblance to “Tappan Sea.” It is of about the same breadth, but much longer, extending to something like twenty miles; — the coasts are similar, and civilization in course of time will make the likeness closer. About half way, on the Wisconsin side, the already bold coast rises into a range of some two hundred and fifty feet, the upper part of which, from forty to sixty feet, extends as a bare, weather eaten wall, supporting its roof of short grass and scrub oak; the lower part forms a graceful, shrub-covered slope to the water. From the nighest and highest point, “The Maiden’s Rock,” the story is that an Indian girl once threw herself, rather than wed

<sup>25</sup> *Reveille*, August 18, 1845. This letter, which is undated, is number 10 in the series.



against her choice, and was *drowned!*<sup>26</sup> If this be so, it establishes the truth of an opinion entertained by many, that these waters were once much higher, — even at the base of this wall, and that they have broken through upon the lower country. *But*, if this be so, it is rather odd that the girl's fate should be remembered and the subsequent convulsion be unknown! and if there were no subsequent change, then did the dark skinned Sappho never drown herself! for a rifle shot from the cliff would hardly reach the water. Again, if she threw herself *at all* it was into the arms of cradling trees and bushes, which probably concealed her till night brought her lover and his canoe. This version is quite as romantic, and, upon viewing the spot, infinitely more probable, for a jump from it would, seemingly, hardly secure destruction.

Passing through the lake, the traveller is once more involved amid countless Islands; winding among which a few miles brings him to the lonely and picturesque Indian village of *Red Wing*, chief of a band of Sioux. Here, an unexpected discharge from our cannon made divers dark skinned paddlers spring from their canoes to the shore, while a crowd of red, white, brown, and dirty, blanketed figures, old and young, male and female, rushed down the hill towards the landing. The scene was extremely animated; above ranged the large bark built wigwams, — some twenty feet square with sloping roofs; the top and side of the hill was fringed and faced by Indians; while the strand was covered by eager passengers, better dressed but less civil than the savages. The general inquiry was for one Jack Fraser<sup>27</sup> or "Iron Face," a half breed, — son of a Scotchman, — renowned for being the possessor of an assorted stock of *thirty scalps*, taken by his own hand, from the heads of even that number of men, women, and children! To this collection, it is said, "Iron Face" is desirous of adding the scalp of his *own father*, if he can ever catch him, "for not having brought him up a *white man!*" Truly, from the peculiar talent evinced by him, he has been a great loss to society! He would have been "death" at a *toupee*, as the saying is! "Iron Face," however, was not at home; his peculiar tastes (whisky included) prevent him from walking a straight path, and he is now in apprehension of being

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of various versions of the story of Maiden Rock, see G. Hubert Smith, "The Winona Legend," *ante*, 13: 367-376.

<sup>27</sup> A biography of Joseph J. Frazer, a famous half-breed warrior and guide, was written by Henry H. Sibley and published in sixteen weekly installments in the *St. Paul Pioneer*, beginning with the issue of December 2, 1866.

arrested by the whites for some misdemeanor. The attention of some of the lady passengers was attracted towards a mild-eyed, pleasant-featured creature, the daughter of Red Wing the chief; her manner was extremely modest, and her shy consent to *stand* to our lady artist for a sketch, was the most *naïve* thing imaginable. She afterwards conducted us to her wigwam to exhibit certain ornaments of her own handiwork. This band of Sioux consists of about three hundred; their village is a permanent residence. A *missionary*, with his family, resides among them;<sup>28</sup> they plant corn and potatoes, and among their fields rise the rude scaffoldings on which are deposited the bodies of the dead. A strange but not unpleasing custom, this! Instead of giving the faces, yet bright in memory, to gloom and to the earthworm, the sun and the free airs receive their elements. The waving flags and ornamented coffin have their moral as well as the cypress and the sod; and when the fleshly garb has disappeared—borne as an impalpable vapor upon the air, not absorbed in slime by the gross earth—when the frame invites no more disturbance,—then is it placed in earth, as in a casket.

An elderly and most agreeable lady, the wife of the resident missionary, joined us on board, on a visit to her friends at Fort Snelling, and from her we obtained many interesting particulars with regard to savage life. From her account, Indians are by no means as supposed free from the visiting horrors of conscience. The warrior shrinks at night from the forms of pleading children and their mothers—his own upbraided spirit joining them. As to “Iron Face,” who is a celebrated *brave*, but whose deeds have been, to the full Indian degree, characterized by treachery and cruelty, *he never sleeps without a light!* His first purchase from the missionary was a box of candles, and he continues the expenditure. With regard to the daughter of the chief, mentioned heretofore, the lady told us that, as a child, she was full of promise—gentle, intelligent and affectionate. She learned to use the needle with great skill, and began to take great interest in religion. Growing in beauty, she was the admiration of white and red, but the more willing ear which youthful vanity lent to the first, ruined her.

<sup>28</sup> Two Swiss missionaries, Daniel Gavin and Samuel Dentan, served at Red Wing's village, on the present site of the city of Red Wing, for some years before 1845, when Gavin retired because of the ill health of his wife. William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:203 (St. Paul, 1921).

She changed as a flower in a poisoned atmosphere; she passed through other hands, and withered under their pernicious tending; yet still, her fragrance gone, she was one to call forth sympathy. A simple savage, she was innocent and even the barbarism of civilization had not quite destroyed the beauty it had trampled on.

It is usual for white men who have lived among and dealt with Indians, to cry out against them as lying, treacherous, thieving, &c.; yet, how is it that a commerce with white men invariably *makes them worse?* . . . The Indians, from *Prairie du Chien* up, are forbidden, by treaty, to cross to the east side of the river; yet every trader who sets up a hut and a whisky barrel, surrounds himself with a swarm, strips them alike of their money and their senses; when outrage, perhaps, calling for the presence of a company, the very steamer which takes them up brings also a fresh store of whisky to the trader; the Indians are driven off and punished, while the seducer remains to tap his barrels and summon his customers again, the moment the soldiers have turned their backs!

It strikes me that I have written a very long letter, but I feel alive to this subject though I do sign myself

“A DEAD MAN.”

ST. PETERS, August 2d, 1845<sup>29</sup>

*Mene-ha-ha, or The Water that Laughs*:—so are the Falls of St. Anthony called by the children of the wild.<sup>30</sup> Who shall say that the red-skins have not a chiming fancy? A thousand silver bells mingle with their guttural tones—a thousand gentle and poetic fancies sport amid the smoke of their wigwams. The *Laughing Waters*! Truly, one should dream awhile beneath the “singing trees” of the Arabian Nights, and, waking, swallow a draft from the fountain of youth; he should have taken a shower bath with Undine, and listened to the enchanted horn of Sir Huon, ere trusting himself to discourse of these merry gushings—these leaping, laughing foam-voices of the north! Lacking all these means of inspiration, I must be content to rouse my brain and accelerate my blood with a draught of the invigor-

<sup>29</sup> *Reveille*, August 25, 1845. In the newspaper, the date appears at the end of the letter.

<sup>30</sup> This is an error. The Falls of St. Anthony are in the Mississippi River at Minneapolis. Minnehaha Falls, which were known earlier as the Little Falls or as Brown's Falls, are in a branch of the Mississippi known as Minnehaha Creek. Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1: 139, 232.

ating air of 45° N. and with the thought that I at this moment occupy the paradisaical position of a *resurrected* one! — I am no longer “A Dead Man!”

Fort Snelling, at the head of navigation, a few miles below the Falls, rears its grey walls and circular “keep” along the brows of a high bluff — or rather the advanced point of that elevated table land which separates the Mississippi and St. Peters rivers, here uniting. Every body of course knows how a fort is built, and the gentlemen of the station had undoubtedly arrived at that conclusion, which may, perhaps, account for their evident desire not to *bore* us with their company. For an hour or so we were allowed the unrestricted freedom of the grounds; the ladies, particularly, stimulated by a slight thirst after climbing the hill, being archly left to exercise their ingenuity and *instinct* by *finding out the pump!* At length the really polite sutler of the garrison, provided us with the means of conveyance, and we set out for a ride of seven miles, over the prairie to the Falls.

What an unceasing charm exists in the harmony of falling water; — from the awful bass of Niagara, to the trills and cadences of its suppling springs; from the stilly sweep of the Mississippi, round its lower bends, to the laughing chorus of its rapids, the deeper burthen of its plunging flood. Its yet *unheard* music lent a tone to our lumbering wheels, as we crossed the prairie swells; our thronged wagon became a triumphal car, each flower sent forth a voice, and, for once, the *whir* of the grouse had another melody than that of the gridiron.

Hark! a low, deep symphony now rises on the ear, and a turn from the path presents to view “Little [*Minnehaha*] Falls,” the snowy plunge into a picturesque dell of a small bright stream, the drain of a neighboring lake [*Minnetonka*]. This is about one-third of the distance to the Grand Falls, and after a sufficient gaze, and a draught from the crystal spring, on we went again. It is a fortunate thing that all persons are not of such a mathematical — geometrical turn of genius, that it is impossible to surprise them! There are a sort of people who “never go any where,” knowing, already, “exactly what it is!” They have the measurements, understand the topography, and, sitting in their parlors, they will tell you more about the matter than the visitor could possibly do. Thanks to a deficiency of calculation which will always keep some people poor, and a sufficiency of ideality which will always keep them rich — anticipation never mars their enjoyment — there is still to them, in all cases, something left,

partaking of the *unexpected*! "'Tis in ourselves that we are *thus* or *thus*," and, for my own part, I wouldn't exchange my "thus" for that of the more knowing, — but yonder spread "the Laughing Waters!"

The Falls of St. Anthony are neither as "slublime" as Niagara, as "picturesque" as "Glen's," as "peculiar" as Montmorenci, nor as "pretty" as the Passaic; but scrambling down the banks, and jumping from fragment to fragment of their former bed, till amid tinted sprays the roaring mirth of the whole watery scene bursts closely on him, the visitor must take it cool[ly] indeed, if he misses the boasted features of either of those mentioned. These present have no height, but a world of variety. Their breadth, some third of a mile, is broken by huge blocks, wrecks of a former bed; a rough strange island and intervening deposits [*sic*] of timber; while surging around all, leaps the loud shouting waters! Indigo-blue, bright green and frosted silver, tumbling and changing, circling, rushing, flashing, — and the grand thought still ringing over all, "Two thousand miles away sounds the far sea!" It is very difficult to talk of the Mississippi valley without alluding to the cities of Egypt, and the arts of Greece; they are standard objects of comparison; but it is a vice of style which time will cure, our age and our *scope* walk hand in hand with equally incomparable grandeur. A dip in the whirling eddies; a song to the brown old rocks; anon, a silent long breathed reverie, and, — all of a sudden, an enquiry is suggested as to *what is in the basket*? Oh happy basket! Capacious, covered, comfortable basket! thrice treasured for thy short hour of neglect! Ham, sirloin, tongue, fresh roll, and, by all means, a choice black bottle, to say nothing of the sugared varieties of confectionary.

There is nothing, it strikes me, which so clearly marks the humor dispelling potency of country air, as the endurance by queasy stomachs, while under its appetising influence, of women eating! Byron was not alone in his nervous horror of munching jaws; and, as a general thing, the fair ones are aware of it, for it is a main article of etiquette with the many to make a *pretty mouth* while masticating, — if any thing, a greater abomination than the other! I must pursue this matter no further, though, or I may be suspected of a relapse of stomach.

Again on board! adieu to the "Laughing Waters," Farewell to *Fort Snelling's pump*!

No longer "A DEAD MAN."

What became of the resurrected newspaperman the writer does not know, but the slow, easy trip with its long periods of rest, its quiet pleasures, its healthful air, and its stimulating changes of scene was just the prescription he needed.<sup>31</sup> If he was Joseph L. Chester, he lived nearly forty years longer. The upper Mississippi was justifying itself as a health resort.

JOHN FRANCIS McDERMOTT

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

<sup>31</sup> The "Time" probably reached St. Louis on August 11. The *Reveille* of August 18 reported further troubles that confronted it on the trip downstream. The author of the letters may have left the boat with other passengers at Galena, for his trip through the diggings was made on the way down, or he may have returned to St. Louis. The newspapers there have no further news of him. In August, 1846, the "Time," then running in the St. Louis-Galena trade, sank near Pontoussuc, Iowa. Merrick, *Old Times*, 190.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).