

## Prologue

*"Too thick to drink, too thin to plow."*

Although many of us don't remember it, it is the Missouri River, and not the Mississippi, that is the longest in North America. The Missouri has played a crucial role in U. S. history; Lewis and Clark began their journey to the Pacific there, Sam Clemens, before he became Mark Twain, learned to pilot a riverboat there, and it has supported human settlements since the Pleistocene. Until the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, the Missouri served as one of the main thoroughfares for Manifest Destiny. And yet its reputation – ugly, foul---smelling, ruthless, and muddy – consigns it to the recesses of our collective memory, at least for most of us who live away from both its attractions and its menace. If the American consciousness has a river, it's the Mississippi, home of the paddleboat and Huckleberry Finn. The river of our subconscious, however, is the Missouri: opaque, ominous, and impossible to tame.

The Missouri rises in the northern Rockies and roars southeast through mountains and valleys and over waterfalls. It levels out as it crosses into the Dakotas and then cuts south, widening as it meanders through the farmland and cities of the central plains. In the mid---19<sup>th</sup> century, it was more than a mile across as it bisected the new state of Missouri. Steamboats carried settlers and supplies into the frontier as hunters and trappers shipped furs and meat to markets downstream. As we have throughout history, we tried to shape the river to do our bidding, damming, re---routing, channeling, and dredging it to maximize its utility and minimize both its power and its threats. The river's route has been changed so

drastically that, in 1987, a group of Kansas City businessmen decided to find and excavate the wreck of a steamboat that sank in the river in 1856; the *Arabia* was found forty---five feet beneath a cornfield, nearly a mile from the river's present banks.

As the fur trade caved to silk and cotton, and as more efficient transportation became available, the Lower Missouri was slowly abandoned by nearly all but the U. S. Geological Survey, the Army Corps of Engineers, and those who live alongside it. Today, in the aftermath of two massive destructive forces – the floods of 2011 and the Great Recession – there is remarkably little river traffic, either industrial or recreational. Asian carp threaten native fish species. And the river itself, between its powerful current and the sheer tonnage of floating and submerged debris, makes both navigation and swimming a challenge. The Missouri runs to its confluence with the Mississippi nearly devoid of human traffic.

It is a big, muddy, nondescript river without much scenic value or recreational opportunity. It doesn't smell; it does sustain millions of the descendants of the mosquitoes that plagued the Corps of Discovery in 1804. The destruction from the floods of 2011 is still vivid. Dead and dying trees line the banks. Its boat traffic is mainly limited to fishermen, law enforcement, and a small number of sand dredging operations. The history of flooding means that there is very little of anything man---made on its banks, save massive power plants and a couple of airports.

And yet, as I watch a string of wild turkeys pick their way along the shoreline, and flinch when the first of many Asian carp leaps three feet in the air beside my

boat, I begin to see what is beautiful about the Lower Missouri. It's not the scenery; the Missouri will never compete aesthetically with high---mountain rivers like its tributary, the Yellowstone, or the upper Hudson, or even the Susquehanna, as it carves its huge cleft through eastern Maryland.

What makes the Missouri beautiful is something in its refusal to play by our rules. After more than a century of humans redirecting, channeling, and dredging, it still jumps its banks and goes where it chooses. Its power is unspeakably dangerous; more than fifty people died in the flood waters of 1993 and 2011. The floods ravaged farmlands and swamped the few cities close to its banks. It is a complex, difficult, threatening river. And its lack of traditional beauty, from its mud---brown water to its scruffy banks, limits its appeal for tourism. The Mississippi has Mark Twain, Memphis, and New Orleans. The Lower Missouri has virtually nothing.

And that nothingness protects it. The Missouri is a forgotten river, all but abandoned by both commercial and recreational interests. Apart from maintaining what must be maintained to sustain the dredging industry and protect against the next inevitable flood, the river is left largely to its own devices. Those people who remain have installed floating docks and built their homes as high atop the levees as they can. The river, below its central dams, is no longer wild. It has been chiseled and narrowed to serve our purposes and protect our interests. It has been colonized by a foreign species that has no predators and no clear means of suppression. The river bottom is being sucked up and sold for concrete and industrial use. Neither Lewis nor Clark would recognize the lower Missouri today.

But it steadfastly maintains itself – still muddy, still riddled with sand bars and submerged trees and logs racing invisibly downstream just below the surface. Despite all the human efforts to force it into submission, despite its manifest alterations, it continues to refuse to live within its constraints. It runs downstream to the Mississippi – a river that has been even more aggressively contained – as a vivid reminder that our capacity for control is limited. And the Missouri River allows us to see, if we're willing to look closely, that there is great beauty in its refusal to be either drunk or plowed.

Chapter 1

*"Big rivers make me think of serpents and dragons, always dangerous, never still." ~*

*Scott Russell Sanders*

In his autobiography, *Life on the Mississippi*, after first appropriating the whole of the Missouri as a tributary in order to make the Mississippi the longest river on the planet, Mark Twain describes the Missouri by citing the journals of Jacques Joliet and Louis Marquette, the first Europeans to navigate almost the full length of the Mississippi:

A short distance below 'a torrent of yellow mud rushed furiously athwart the calm blue current of the Mississippi, boiling and surging and sweeping in its course logs, branches, and uprooted trees.' This was the mouth of the Missouri, 'that savage river,' which 'descending from its mad career through a vast unknown of barbarism, poured its turbid floods into the bosom of its gentle sister.'

One hundred and thirty---one years after Marquette and Joliet, Lewis and Clark's journals further illustrate the perils of the river:

Persons accustomed to the navigation of the Missouri ... uniformly take the precaution to load their vessels heaviest in the bow ... to avoid the danger incedent to running foul of the concealed timber which lyes in great quantities in the beds of these rivers.

Meriweather Lewis, May 15, 1804

The Missouri is still savage, still brimming with mud and secret menace. Kolks – surface whirlpools signifying something beneath the surface large enough to