



History of navigation on the Yellowstone river
by John G MacDonald

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.
Montana State University
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HISTORY
of
NAVIGATION ON THE YELLOWSTONE RIVER

by

John G. MacDonald

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NAVIGATION ON THE YELLOWSTONE RIVER
by

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B.A., Jamestown College, 1937

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In the mass of literature connected with the fur trade and exploration and settlement of the region now comprising Montana, the Missouri River as a route and a means of travel has received ample recognition, but its great tributary, the Yellowstone, has fared less well. It is little realized that travel on the Yellowstone River, from the days of the fur-trader to the coming of the railroad, played a very significant part in the history of the region. The Yellowstone was important first in exploration, and then in the fur trade, and finally was the decisive factor in the ability of the United States Army to open up one of the last remaining areas in the Northwest for settlement and peaceful pursuits.

Though never rivaling in tonnage or number of boats the well-traveled Missouri River route to Fort Benton, the Yellowstone River nevertheless supported a burden of traffic that warrants recognition. To recount its story, with emphasis on the contribution which travel on its swift-flowing waters made towards the exploration and final settlement of a large segment of present Montana, is the purpose of this study.

A general history of the Yellowstone Valley has been written many times, and details of its geography well covered. It is proposed, in this paper, to deal only with those phases in which water transportation played a large part. A brief geographical description will be necessary, however.

The Yellowstone River has its source in the northwest part of Wyoming, then gets its main supply in Yellowstone Lake at approximately $110^{\circ} 30'$ west longitude and $44^{\circ} 30'$ north latitude. From the lake it runs almost due north through the famous grand canyon, and through other narrow gorges until its junction with the Shield's River, where it changes its course to the eastward, taking a general direction a little north of east until it receives the Powder River, when its course changes to almost due northeast and it enters the Missouri about three miles above old Fort Buford, just over the line in North Dakota.

The Yellowstone drainage area is 70,400 square miles and its length over 440 miles, with a maximum width of about 310 miles. The main tributaries are the Clark's Fork, Big Horn, Tongue, and Powder Rivers, all flowing from the South.

The valley of the Yellowstone where it opens out presents a lovely landscape of bottom-lands dotted with groves, gradually elevated benches well grassed and prettily wooded, reaching to the foothills, and for a background the silver-crested

summits of the Yellowstone (Absaroka) range.¹

The valley of the Yellowstone is nowhere very wide, varying from narrow canyons above and below the present Livingston to fertile valleys ten to fifteen miles wide.

With the exception of the five miles at the lower end, where the valleys of the Yellowstone and Missouri appear to blend into one, the river has no shifting bars, and for much of its course, especially before it receives the heavy load of silt from the Big Horn and Powder Rivers, it is a clear, swift-running mountain stream, over gravel bottom, and with no snags.² The current is normally more rapid than that of the Missouri, and the gradient more steep, averaging 3.5 feet per mile between Billings and the mouth, and a maximum of 7 feet per mile. The elevation of the river at Yellowstone Lake is 7,564 feet above sea level. At the mouth of the Big Horn it is 2,831 feet, at Glendive 2,070, whereas the elevation of the Missouri as far up as Fort Benton is only 2,815 feet.³

¹Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of Washington, Idaho and Montana, 1845-1889, Vol. XXXI, Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, (San Francisco: The History Company, 1890), p. 595.

²United States House Executive Document #1, Part 2, "Survey of the Yellowstone River," Report of the Secretary of War, 46th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. II, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), p. 1097.

³Michael A. Leeson, History of Montana, 1739-1885, (Chicago: Warner Beers & Company, 1885), p. 21.

There are only two major rapids between its mouth and what proved to be the head of steamboat navigation--a point just south of the present Billings. The Buffalo Rapids, about eight miles above Glendive, and Wolf Rapids, just below the mouth of the Powder River, have been mentioned in several survey reports.⁴

The word "Yellowstone" appears to have descended through two translations from a native tongue. The natural color which gave rise to the descriptive name might well have been that on the walls of the famous grand canyon of the Yellowstone, or even the very common yellowish color of the bluffs and rimrocks to be found almost anywhere along the lower course of the river.

The Indian name is reported to have been Mi-tsi-a-da-zi, or Rock Yellow River.⁵ The French called it either Roche Jaune or Pierre Jaune, which the English explorers and trappers translated as Yellow Rock or Yellow Stone.

David Thompson, British explorer and geographer, who was among the Mandan Indians from Dec. 29, 1797 until

⁴United States House Executive Document #256, The Yellowstone River, Wyoming, Montana, and North Dakota, 73rd Congress, 2nd Session, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1934), p. 135.

⁵An Illustrated History of the Yellowstone Valley, (Spokane: Western Historical Publishing Company), p. 252. No Author or Publication date given.

Jan. 10, 1798, estimated the latitude and longitude of the sources of the Yellowstone, based on information from the natives, with amazing accuracy. He used the name "Yellow Stone" in his journal and field notes.⁶

However, probably the first time the word "Yellow stone" appeared on an official document was on the map and in the report sent back from their winter camp among the Mandans by Lewis and Clark in 1805 to President Jefferson. This report was also based on information from the Indians.⁷

The Crow Indians also had another name for the river, calling it Elk River, because of the abundance of that type of animal ranging there.⁸

When the Crow tribe of Indians was first known to the whites, it occupied the country stretching from the North Platte to the Yellowstone, along the eastern base of the Rocky Mountains eastward to the mouth of the Yellowstone, and occasionally northward to the Musselshell. Several interesting theories, among them that given by Lieutenant

⁶ Elliott Goues, New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest, The Journals of David Thompson and Alexander Henry, Three Volumes, (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), Vol. I, p. 302.

⁷ An Illustrated History, p. 251, and Hiram Martin Chittenden, Yellowstone Park, (Cincinnati: The Robert Clark Company, 1900), p. 1.

⁸ Chittenden, Yellowstone Park, p. 3.

Bradley in his journal,⁹ are advanced concerning the possible earlier Southern origin of this tribe. This has been hinted because of some physical characteristics, and tribal traditions. Bradley mentions the possibility of their place or origin being as far away as the Gulf of Mexico, or the Atlantic coast in Georgia or South Carolina, with intermediate stops along the Kansas River.

The Indians used boats very little, with the exception of the famous bull boat, and that was used usually for ferrying across streams, for their travel routes in the Yellowstone region were more often North and South. The Crows were indeed fortunate to live in the Yellowstone and Big Horn valleys, where buffalo roamed continuously because of winter range, and where other game was plentiful, and where they had no need to travel very far. It is no wonder they fought bitterly against the pressure of the Sioux tribes, which were being pushed westward by the advancing white frontiers, and leagued with the white man's soldiers in the war against the Sioux. The Crow nation had been traditionally considered to be friendly to the whites, though not

⁹Lieutenant James H. Bradley, "Journal," Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana, (Helena, Montana: State Publishing Company, 1896), Vol. II, p. 177. This series, in ten volumes, to date, has been printed by different publishers at intervals from 1876 to 1941, and will hereafter be referred to simply as Montana Contributions.

above horse-stealing raids or an occasional killing, and so they remained during the course of the nineteenth century. Horse stealing was regarded as one of the most honorable achievements among the Crows, and they were occasionally cruel and treacherous, but on the whole were quite highly regarded by whites during the period of this history.

This early friendship, established by John Colter and the other trappers and traders who followed quickly on the heels of the Lewis and Clark expedition, directly influenced the course of travel into the upper Missouri region, and gave impetus to more travel on the Yellowstone River than the Missouri itself received for several years, because of the dreaded Blackfeet tribe. Colter directed the first American trappers and traders to the Yellowstone region, as we shall see, and returned several times with Manuel Lisa.

The earliest travel on the Yellowstone, before the coming of the white man, must have been almost entirely by means of the bull-boat, above-mentioned, with perhaps an occasional dug-out canoe, if the route of travel was in an east-west direction. The bull-boat of the Indian was a small tub-like affair made of one or more buffalo hides stretched over a willow frame, and caulked with grease and tallow. It could be steered erratically by means of paddles and was a frail and troublesome craft, having to be removed

FIGURE I

AN INDIAN BULL-BOAT

(From a photo in Montana Historical Society Collection). See appendix.

from the water and re-caulked frequently, but the fur-traders later made quite large and useful bull-boats for floating hides down-river when no other means were available.

The Yellowstone River saw a variety of craft in use on its waters. Following the bull-boat came the dug-out canoe, the pirogue, the keel-boat, the mackinaw, and finally the steamboat. These will be described in greater detail in later chapters as they appeared on the scene.

CHAPTER II

EARLY EXPLORERS AND FUR TRADERS ON THE YELLOWSTONE

The question of who were the first white men to visit the Yellowstone River region is still one of considerable controversy. There is always the very remote possibility that the far-traveling Spaniards, following the eastern base of the Rocky Mountains, may have reached the region, but if so, their routes would have been in a north-south direction, and there exists at present no direct proof of their having extended so far.

Even the exact location of the route of the Verendrye brothers, Francois de la Verendrye, called Chevalier, and Joseph-Louis, in 1742-1743, is still subject to much debate, even though they left a journal of their travels,¹ and a lead marker found near present Pierre, South Dakota, February 16, 1913, which according to the journal, was deposited March 13th, 1743. It is this marker that confuses most theories as to their route, for, according to Doane Robinson and Charles E. DeLand, of the South Dakota Historical Society, if the farthest southwesterly point reached

¹"Journal of LaVerendrye, 1738-39," South Dakota Historical Collections, Vol. VII, (Pierre, S. Dak.: State Publishing Company, 1914), pp. 323-358. See also the Champlain Society edition of the Verendrye letters and journals.

by these intrepid French traders and explorers is assumed to be the Big Horn mountains, it is difficult to see how they could have traveled the distance between there and Pierre, South Dakota, according to the time schedule of the journal.² The DeLand view, then, is that the Black Hills were the mountains seen by the Verendrye brothers.

The other, and more widely accepted view, is that the Verendryes traveled in a more southwesterly direction from the Mandan villages on the Missouri, and in January of 1743 were along the eastern slopes of the Big Horn mountains. There their Indian companions became frightened, and the whole party beat a retreat to the eastward, probably skirting the Black Hills on the north along the Belle Fourche River. Unfortunately, the Verendryes' instrument for measuring latitude had been broken, and little care was taken to give specific descriptions of the country traveled, so that the whole subject is still a matter of controversy. It is not the purpose of this report to settle that dispute, since the Verendryes traveled entirely by land, but they are mentioned simply as white men who quite probably were the first in the Yellowstone region.

French fur-traders from the lower Mississippi and

²Charles E. DeLand, "The Verendrye Explorations and Discoveries," South Dakota Historical Collections, Vol. VII, (Pierre: State Publishing Company, 1914), pp. 89-322.

Spaniards from New Mexico may have become familiar with the lower Yellowstone and its southern tributaries, although there is not definite proof of this.³

It is much more probable that the first white man to travel the waters of the Yellowstone River was Charles Le Rays, a French-Canadian, who was a prisoner of a group of Indians and forced to wander with them through this region during the winter of 1802-03. LeRaye left an account of his wanderings⁴ and, according to it, his party reached the Yellowstone (which he called the Jaun) on July 15th, 1802, at a point the writer estimated to be about one hundred miles above its mouth. The party turned southward, wandered in the Big Horn region, met Crow Indians, and camped on the Big Horn River on the night of October 5th, 1802. There the men built bull-boats and proceeded in them to the mouth of the river, which they reached on the 11th, and from whence they proceeded up the Yellowstone. "The river is rapid, but has no obstruction. The ice now began to float, which rendered

³Harrison Clifford Dale, The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific 1822-1829, (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1941), p. 25.

⁴Charles LeRaye, "The Journal of Charles LeRaye," South Dakota Historical Collections, edited by Doane Robinson from the journal published and translated in Boston, 1812, by Jervasse Cutler, (Sioux Falls, S. Dak.: Press of Mark D. Scott, 1908), Vol. IV, pp. 150-180.

our navigation dangerous in such slight vessels."⁵

The party camped for the winter with some Crow Indians somewhere on the present Stillwater River. When the weather again became mild they moved on up that stream, and on the 12th of April, after traveling overland in a north-easterly direction, LeRaye reported they were back on the Powder River. By the 18th of April they were on the Knife River, in present North Dakota.⁶ LeRaye escaped from the Indians April 26, 1804, but his wanderings apparently had little or no effect on later trade or trips to the region.

Another fur-trader, who preceded Captain Clark down the Yellowstone Valley by one year, was Antoine Larocque, a French-Canadian who had come by way of the Mandans as a representative of the Northwest Company of Canada. He was, according to his own record,⁷ heading for the Yellowstone River from the Big Horn region on Tuesday, September 10, 1805.

⁵Ibid., p. 175.

⁶Loc. cit.

⁷Francois Antoine Larocque, "The Journal of Francois Antoine Larocque from the Assiniboine River to the Yellowstone--1805," edited by Laurence J. Burpee, Canadian Archives, Report, 1911. The edition here used was an English translation by Ruth Hazlett, published in The Frontier; (Missoula, Montana: State University, 1934), Vol. XIV, pp. 241-247, 332-339; Vol. XV, pp. 67-75; and reprinted as Sources of Northwest History, No. 20, Missoula, Montana.

The camp was raised at nine o'clock and we turned in the direction of the northwest toward the Yellowstone river where we arrived at two o'clock in the afternoon. . . The current of this beautiful and great river is very great; the savages say that there are not any falls there.⁸

This point was somewhere on the Yellowstone between Pryor Creek and the Clark's Fork. Here Larocque decided to return to the Northeast, and told the Indians he would be back to trade the next year. Since he traveled on foot and on horseback he contributed nothing to the history of navigation on the Yellowstone, but showed that the region was known before Clark's journey in 1806.

The famous Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific Coast first sighted the Yellowstone on Thursday, April 25th, 1805.

The Indians inform that the Yellowstone River is navigable for perogues and canoes nearly to its source in the Rocky Mountains, and that in its course near these mountains it passes within less than half a day's march of a navigable part of the Missouri.⁹

The party camped near the mouth of the Yellowstone, but after a few surveys had been made a short distance up that river, the expedition continued on up the Missouri.

The following year, after a winter spent on the

⁸Ibid., p. 20.

⁹Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition 1804-1806; edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites, in seven volumes and Atlas; (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), Vol. I, Part 2, p. 339.

Pacific coast, the successful explorers were returning, and at Traveler's Rest, on Lolo Creek, in the beautiful Bitterroot Valley of Montana, Tuesday, July 1st, 1806, Lewis and Clark made plans for their separation. Captain Lewis and party were to go by the most direct route to the falls of the Missouri, and on an exploratory side trip up the Marias River. The remainder of the men, according to Lewis' journal of that date, were:

. . . to proceed with Capt. Clark to the head of Jefferson's River where we deposited sundry articles and left our canoes. from hence Sergt. Ordway with a party of 9 men are to descend the river with the canoes; Capt. C. with the remaining ten including Charbono and York will proceed to the Yellowstone river at its nearest approach to the three forks of the Missouri, here he will build a canoe and descend the Yellowstone river with Charbono the indian woman, his servant York and five others to the Missouri where should he arrive first he will await my arrival. Sergt. Pryor with two other men are to proceed with the horses by land to the Mandans.¹⁰

On July 3rd Captain Clark and his party separated from Lewis and turned up the Bitterroot River, crossed over into what is now called the Big Hole, thence up the Wisdom or Big Hole River, and crosses another divide to what is now called Grasshopper Creek. Down this stream they went to its junction with the Jefferson, where they picked up the cached canoes and provisions and proceeded on down to

¹⁰Ibid., p. 176, V, 2.

the Three Forks. Here Sergeant Ordway left to proceed on down the Missouri with the canoes, portage around the falls, and meet Captain Lewis. Captain Clark, with a party that now consisted of, besides himself, "Sergt. Pryor, Jo. Shields, G. Shannon, W. Bratton, Labiech, Windsor, H. Hall, Gibson, the Interpreter Sharbono, Wife and child, York, 49 horses and a colt,"¹¹ crossed overland by a pass between the present Bozeman and Livingston, Montana, recommended by the Indian woman, and later to become famous as Bozeman Pass. Clark reached the "River Rochejhone" at about the present site of Livingston, on Tuesday, July 15th, 1806, at 2:00 P.M., and noted that it was "120 yards wide bold, rapid and deep."¹²

The party was disappointed in not finding sufficiently large timber for dug-out canoes, and was forced to continue downstream on foot and horseback. Clark recorded in his journal for July 15th:

The Roche passes out of a high rugged mountain covered with snow. The bottoms are narrow within the mountains but wider in the Vally below. . . . I can see no timber Sufficient large for a Canoe which will carry more than 3 men and such a one would be too small to answer my purpose.¹³

By the 17th of July, passing near the present Big

¹¹Ibid., V, 2, p. 259.

¹²Ibid., V, 2, p. 264.

¹³Ibid., V, 2, p. 265.

Timber, Montana, they had still not found anything suitable for their needs.

On the 18th, just above the mouth of what Clark called the Rosebud River, but which is now known as the Stillwater, Gibson snagged his thigh. His painful travel made it even more imperative that timber for canoes be found.

Finally, about sixteen and one-half miles below the Stillwater, at a place with high bluffs on the south, wide bottoms on the north, where the river makes a northward bend, Clark camped.¹⁴ Although the Cottonwood timber there was larger than above, it would still make only small dug-out canoes. However, after sending a scouting party downstream for about twelve miles, and finding none larger, Clark:

. . . determined to have two canoes made out of the largest of those trees and lash them together which will cause them to be sturdy and fully sufficient to take my small party & Self with what little baggage we have down this river.¹⁵

He had handles put in three axes, and put three men to work while the remainder prepared dried meat, repaired their sadly worn clothing, and allowed the horses to rest.

¹⁴This point is just southwest of present Park City, Montana. The highway information marker is deceptive, giving the impression that the point is East of Park City, and should be changed.

¹⁵Thwaites edition, Journals, V, 2, p. 278.

On the morning of July 21st, half their horses were missing, and after a thorough search, they concluded that Indians had made off with them. By evening one canoe was almost ready, and by noon on Wednesday, July 23rd, both were finished. Oars and poles were prepared, and Sergeant Pryor, G. Shannon, and Windsor got instructions for taking the remaining horses overland to the Mandan villages. The two canoes were put in the water, lashed together, and everything was prepared for departure in the morning.

The canoes were twenty-eight feet long, sixteen or eighteen inches deep, and from sixteen to twenty-four inches wide.¹⁶

The next morning the first recorded downstream navigation of the Yellowstone River began. The start was not auspicious, for at a riffle about one mile above the entrance of the Clark's Fork (which Clark mistakenly first called the Big Horn and later named after himself), the canoes took on water, and had to be beached to dry out. The junction of the Clark's Fork and Yellowstone, Clark decided, would make an ideal spot for an establishment, for "here the beaver country begins."¹⁷

¹⁶Ibid., V, 2, p. 281.

¹⁷Ibid., V, 2, p. 288.

Pryor had been having difficulty with the horses, so one more man was assigned to him. His party was ferried across to the south side of the river just below the Clark's Fork, and he and his men were not seen again until the main group was well below the mouth of the Yellowstone.

The navigators proceeded on very easily now, making seventy and eighty miles a day. On the 25th of July Clark noted and investigated the well-known landmark he named Pompey's Tower, and now known as Pompey's Pillar.

At the Big Horn River, on the 26th, Clark walked up its valley for a few miles. He noted in his journal:

This river (Big Horn) is said to be navigable a long way for perogues without falls and waters a fine rich open country.¹⁸

Sunday and Monday, the 27th and 28th, were spent gliding on down, making good time, but Clark was disappointed in that he saw no Crow Indians. He had a long speech all prepared, if he should meet any. The only discomfort seemed to be from want of clothing, which was falling off them from wear. Elk, buffalo, and beaver were plentiful.

Below the Tongue River, which was passed July 29th, Clark noted the changing character of the river--wider, with more sand and gravel bars than above. Twelve miles below they ran into shoals, or rapids. There was a succession of

¹⁸Ibid., V, 2, p. 298.

them for about six miles, the lowest one being the worst, and over which they lowered the canoes by hand.

This is by far the worst place which I have seen on this river from the Rocky mountains to this place. . . . a Perogue or large canoe would with Safty pass through the worst of those Shoals, which I call the Buffalow Shoals.¹⁹

Twenty miles below more were passed, which Clark called Bear Rapids. Still further on down, above the present Glendive, Montana, another rapid-water stretch was passed. This he named Wolf Rapid, and all three have kept this nomenclature.

Now the navigational hazards began to be of a more unique type. Below Glendive immense herds of buffalo were crossing the river, forcing frequent stops, and slowing their pace. Rains and "musquetors" were also added to their troubles, until, as the junction approached, little rest from the insects was had by any in the party, day or night.

At 8:00 A.M., Tuesday, August 3rd, the party arrived at the junction of the Yellowstone with the Missouri, and camped at a point between the two rivers. Clark estimated he had traveled 636 miles on the Yellowstone,

. . . in 2 Small Canoes lashed together in which I had the following Persons. John Shields, George Gibson, William Bratten, W. Labeech, Tous. Shabono his wife & child & my man York. The Rochejhone or

¹⁹Ibid., v, 2, pp. 308-9.

Yellow Stone river is large and navigable with but few obstructions quite into the rocky Mountains.²⁰

The mosquitoes were so troublesome that Clark left a note on a stick for Lewis, and moved on downstream.

One other short voyage down the Yellowstone, in a different type of craft, should be mentioned before we leave the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Sergeant Pryor, Shanon, Hall, and Windsor, the remainder of the horses having been also stolen by Indians, hiked overland to the Yellowstone, which they struck at about Pompey's Pillar. There they killed a buffalo, and proceeded to make a bull-boat. The description in the Clark journal of the process is worth repeating here.

. . . 2 sticks of 1-1/4 inch diameter is tied together so as to form a round hoop of the size you wish the canoe, or as large as the Skin will allow to cover, two of those hoops are made for the top or brim and the other for the bottom the deapth you wish the canoe, then Sticks of the same size are crossed at right angles and fastened with a throng to each hoop and also where each Stick crosses each other. then the Skin when green is drawn tight over this fraim and fastened with throng to the brim or outer hoop so as to form a perfect bason. One of these canoes will carry 6 or 8 men and their loads.²¹

The four men, on completing their bull-boat, had then floated, easily and swiftly in their rude craft, without

²⁰Ibid., V, 2, p. 319.

²¹Ibid., V, 2, p. 326.

incident, on down the Yellowstone, onto the Missouri, until catching up with Clark, a few days before Lewis and party also appeared.

As Lewis and Clark left the upper Missouri country traders and trappers were already moving in. Nearing the Mandan forts, about 60 miles above Bismarck, North Dakota, Clark wrote:

I observed a canoe near the shore. I directed the canoes to land here I found two men from the illinoies Jos. Dixon and (blank) Hancock those men are on a trapping expedition up the River Rochejhone.²²

The two men returned to the Mandan villages with the party. One of the men of the expedition, John Colter, lured by the prospect of engaging in the fur trade in the mountain region he had just left, asked to be released. Though sorry to lose him, Clark, in a journal entry for August 16, said:

Colter one of our men expressed a desire to join some trappers who offered to become shearers with (him) and furnish traps etc. the offer (was) a very advantageous one to him his services could be dispensed with from this down and as we were disposed to be of service to any one of our party who had performed their duty as well as Colter had done, we agreed to allow him the privilege provided no one of the party would ask or expect a similar permission. . . . We gave Jo Colter Some Small articles which we did not want and some powder & lead.²³

²²Ibid., V, 2, p. 329. Thwaites reports another memorandum among the Lewis and Clark papers spells the names of these men as Joseph Dickson and Forrest Hancock.

²³Ibid., V, 2, pp. 341-342.

Off went this intrepid and lonely wanderer back into the beautiful but dangerous Yellowstone country, when almost within sight of civilization after a trek to the Pacific Coast and back. The story of John Colter's adventures and wanderings and narrow escapes never fails to thrill. Here was a pure example of the mountain man. Sometimes in the company of Dixon and Handcock, later with John Potts, but more often alone, in a canoe or on his own two feet with a heavy pack on his back and rifle in hand, he crossed and recrossed all the Yellowstone and upper Missouri region, visiting Indian tribes, trading for furs or urging the Indians to come to the fort at the mouth of the Big Horn. He engaged in Indian battles, became familiar with at least some of the phenomena in and around the present Yellowstone Park, and most thrilling of all, escaped from a band of Blackfeet who had killed Potts and captured him near the Three Forks of the Missouri, in a spine-chilling foot race for his life. Then, after hiding until dark under a pile of driftwood in the river, with only his nose above water, he made his way, naked, footsore, unarmed, probably traveling only at night, the 250 or more miles to the little post on the Big Horn. There he arrived after seven days, having had nothing to eat but a few roots, and scarcely recognizable to the men at the fort.

Colter himself left no known written record of his

travels and experiences, but several accounts have been interestingly written by men who talked or traveled with him. They differ in some details, being second-hand reports, but the Bradbury account is usually considered the most reliable.²⁴

The exact route of Colter and Dixon and Hancock in the fall of 1806 is not known, though they must have gone into the Yellowstone region, and probably by canoe. Colter had been with Captain Lewis and party on the Missouri on the return trip of the expedition, but a healthy respect for the Blackfeet Indians, if nothing else, would have sent him up the Yellowstone.

The three men wintered in the region, and certain it was that in the spring of 1807, John Colter, with his canoe loaded with furs, was gliding down the Yellowstone and into the Missouri, headed once for St. Louis, two thousand miles away, and civilization. Perhaps he had even built himself a pirogue, two or more canoes lashed together, floored over, and built up at the sides, but since records indi-

²⁴John Bradbury, Travels in the Interior of America In the Years 1809, 1810, 1811, edited by R. G. Thwaites, (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1904); H. M. Brackenridge, Journal of a Voyage up the River Missouri, (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1904); also retold by Hiram Martin Chittenden, The American Fur Trade of the Far West, (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1902); Merrill D. Beal, The Story of Man in Yellowstone (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1949), also contains good material on Colter's route, pp. 24-58 and Appendix.

cate he traveled alone, it was more likely by dug-out canoe.

Once again, however, the lure of the mountains was too strong for Colter. Somewhere along the Missouri, near the mouth of the Platte River, he met Manuel Lisa and party on the way upstream.

Manuel Lisa was a young man of Spanish descent who had arrived at St. Louis about 1790, and by 1800 was already well established in the fur trade. His business ability, initiative, and unusual facility in dealing with the Indians marked him as one of the great figures in the fur trade of the far west. Lisa was quick to understand the importance of the information brought back by Lewis and Clark in 1806, and he soon formed an association with William Morrison and Pierre Menard to tap the trade of tribes in the upper rivers. Their expedition left St. Louis in the spring of 1807, and was this party that met John Colter near the mouth of the Platte.

This was a fortunate meeting for Lisa, for here was an experienced guide, acquainted with the best beaver areas and with the Crow Indians, and one who was, without too great difficulty, persuaded to go back up-river.

No first-hand account of Lisa's 1807 trip is known, but the traditional means of reaching the upper river was by keel-boat, and Lisa must have had at least one. The keel-boat was often sixty to seventy-five feet long with a beam

of fifteen to eighteen feet and a draft of three to four feet.

Rising from the deck some four or five feet was the cargo box, cut off at each end about twelve feet shorter than the boat. This part of the boat, as the name implies, was generally used for freight, but was occasionally fitted up with state-rooms when used for passengers only. The boat was built on thorough principles of shipcraft and was a strong, substantial vessel.²⁵

The keelboat was capable of being propelled by cordelle, or rope, which was pulled by the miserable but indefatigable French-Canadian voyageurs, now wading along treacherous banks, now through willow thickets and clouds of mosquitoes, over snags and fallen trees, through heat or cold, making perhaps, if lucky, twelve to fifteen miles per day. To the amazement and disgust of Americans, who seldom stuck very long to this type of work, the voyageurs could wind up such a day with a meal of sometimes little more than dried corn, dance wildly around the evening fire to the tune of a fiddle, turn in on the frequently damp and cold ground, and continue the same, day after day.

If the water was not too deep, the keelboat was often pushed along by poles. The men would place one end of the pole on the bottom, the other against their shoulder, then, beginning at the front of the boat, they would walk toward

²⁵Chittenden, American Fur Trade, Vol. I, p. 33.

the rear along a little narrow walk, extending the length of the boat on both sides. At the stern they would pick up their pole, return to the bow, and repeat the process.

The following is a description of a keelboat as seen in 1823, which could not have differed materially from those of *Manual Lisa*, which were the first seen on the Yellowstone, in 1807:

At the wharf (St. Louis) lay two large keelboats, the Rocky Mountains and the Yellowstone Packet, very much alike. Each was about fifty feet long by fifteen feet beam, with sharp bow and stern, a mast and sails. The hull was decked over, forming a compartment about five or six feet deep, where supplies were stored. At the bow was a small cannon. Amidships was the cabin, and on each side, extending the length of the boat, was a narrow walk, or *passe-avant*, along which the men could walk while poling the vessel through shallow water.²⁶

Occasionally, when wind and current were right, the keelboat resorted to sails, for it was usually a well-built vessel. It had a carrying capacity of ten to twenty tons. Its draft was about thirty inches when light, and could carry a crew of from twenty to forty men. These craft were built chiefly in Pittsburgh, and taken down the Ohio to St. Louis. The cost was usually from \$2000. to \$3000. Being slow and expensive, only the larger fur companies could afford to purchase, outfit, and send them up-river.²⁷

²⁶P. E. Chappell, "A History of the Missouri River," Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society, Vol. IX, pp. 271-72.

²⁷Montana Contributions, Vol. X, p. 264, citing Chappell, "A History of the Missouri River."

FIGURE II

AN ARTIST'S SKETCH OF THE KEEL BOAT

(From Chappell, "History of the Missouri River,"

P. 261). See appendix.

Manuel Lisa and party, now including John Colter, reached the mouth of the Big Horn River on the Yellowstone late in the season, November 21, 1807, and so lost out on the fall trapping. Quarters and a trading house were started, constituting the first buildings by white men in what is now Montana. Colter started out in the dead of winter on a trip of exploring and notifying Indians of the trading post. Although his route is uncertain, it was on this trip that he was credited with at least approaching parts of what is now Yellowstone Park, and noting some of the wonders of that region.

Manuel Lisa, with his keelboat, or boats, returned to St. Louis in the spring of 1808, leaving a small force at his post at the Big Horn, variously called Fort Lisa or Fort Manuel, but not to be confused with at least two other posts similarly named, on the Missouri, one of which was approximately at the point where the North Dakota, South Dakota state line now crosses the Missouri, and other near present Omaha.

Colter still did not return to St. Louis, but in the company of John Potts, who had been a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and who had come up-river again, evidently with Lisa, he trapped the headwaters of the Missouri, and it was probably during 1808 he had the race for his life near the Three Forks, and Potts lost his life.

Another lonesome and dreary winter was spent at the mouth of the Big Horn. The men probably occupied most of their time cutting fuel, getting in game, trapping whenever the weather permitted, and trading with Indian visitors to the fort, but we may assume that Colter, with his restless nature, spent no more time at the post than necessary.

In 1809, Manuel Lisa, having reorganized his business affairs, and having formed the Missouri Fur Company, with B. Wilkinson, Pierre Choteau, August P. Chouteau, Reuben Lewis, William Clark, Sylvestre Labbadie, Pierre Menard, William Morrison, and Andrew Henry as partners, projected another trip to the Rocky Mountains.

It was for this trip that Thomas James enlisted, and later recorded his experiences.²⁸ James was of Welsh descent, born in Maryland, 1782. His parents had moved west and stopped in Missouri in 1807. When he enlisted for the voyage up the Missouri, he was twenty-seven years of age. The book was written to his dictation in 1846, at Waterloo, Illinois, but was suppressed because of his "bitter prejudices and an unbridled tongue,"²⁹ in reference to men of the Missouri Fur Company, and especially Manuel Lisa, many

²⁸General Thomas James, Three Years Among the Indians and the Mexicans, edited by Walter B. Douglas, (Reprint, St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1916).

²⁹Ibid., p. 8.

of whom or their descendents, were by then respected citizens of St. Louis. The reliability of his accusations is questionable. Certainly men like Manuel Lisa had their faults and enemies in the highly competitive Indian trade, but James is bitter at all times and against everyone. He is sometimes inaccurate as to dates, but he told his story interestingly.

James gives the size of the party as 350 men, but Lisa reported 172 men, nine barges (probably keelboats) and a canoe, an instance of the conflicting statements in the James account.³⁰ This group was made up of French voyageurs and American "engagees." Mr. Chouteau, Col. Menard, and Lisa were in charge. James was a steersman, or "captain," of one of the barges. His crew was all American. The party left St. Louis in June 1809, "and ascended the Missouri by rowing, pushing with poles, cordelling, or pulling with ropes, warping, and sailing."³¹ Many of the Americans deserted. They were not accustomed to the treatment boatmen got, according to the James account.

At the Mandan villages James reported the Company was refusing to carry out its contract, and he and some other malcontents, meeting John Colter, made a deal for some traps on their own. James and two others, Miller and McDaniels,

³⁰Ibid., p. 17.

³¹Ibid., p. 18.

made plans to go to the forks of the Missouri, with Colter as guide. The group started out overland towards Fort Lisa on the Big Horn, but were forced by winter weather into camp. They later became lost for a time, suffered severely from snow-blindness, but in February of 1810 finally reached the Yellowstone and found Col. Menard in charge at the post.

James left the Big Horn for the Three Forks area with thirty-two men, French and American, with Colter still as a guide, and again suffered extreme hardships and snow-blindness, but on April 3rd, 1810, they had reached their destination and had begun the post near the present Three Forks, Montana, that was to have a very short life because of the constant threat of the deadly Blackfeet tribe.

John Colter, after two more narrow escapes in this same area where he made his famous race with death, finally decided he had better keep the oath he had twice made and twice broken--that if spared he would never return to this dangerous section--and, accordingly, once more took his canoe down the Yellowstone, into the Missouri, and, this time, on to St. Louis.

This man came to St. Louis in May, 1810, in a small canoe, from the headwaters of the Missouri, a distance of 3000 miles which he traversed in 30 days.³²

³²Bradbury, op. cit., p. 17.

There John Colter married, and took up land along the Missouri above St. Louis. Here he was seen, again longingly considering joining the Hunt Astoria expedition in 1811, but refraining because of his recent marriage, and here, according to St. Louis court records, John Colter died, in 1813, of jaundice, and in bed.³³

The others at the Three Forks of the Missouri that spring of 1810 also grew discouraged, and prepared to leave. Colonel Menard, James, and party, deserting the profitable but deadly region, crossed over the Yellowstone, and at Twenty-five Yard Creek (Shields' River) they made three canoes of buffalo bull's skin, stretched over a frame. Nine of the men, according to James, went down by canoe, with the traps and furs. In two days they reached the Clark's Fork, where they met a party from the fort and continued on down to Manuel's Post together.

We remained here several days, repairing a keelboat left by Manuel two years before, which we loaded with the goods from the canoes, and then recommenced our descent of the Yellowstone with the canoes and the two boats.³⁴

During this year of 1810, Manuel Lisa had again made the long, arduous, and dangerous journey by keelboat upriver

³³Chittenden, American Fur Trade, Vol. II, p. 723, and Stallo Vinton, John Colter, (New York: Edward Eberstadt, 1926), pp. 104, 110.

³⁴James, op. cit., p. 83.

to the Big Horn, and returned again in the fall to St. Louis. In 1811 he again went up-river to the Fort Manuel Lisa that is believed to have been on the Missouri approximately at the North Dakota-South Dakota boundary. Every journey meant travel in a pirogue or flat-bottomed keelboat, manned with oars, pole, or cordelle, leaving St. Louis as soon as the ice was out of the river, and crawling along against the current, making perhaps ten or fifteen miles a day, if lucky. The Mandan villages were approximately 1500 miles from St. Louis, and Ft. Lisa on the Big Horn was 500 miles beyond that. Lisa alone must have made at least twelve trips,³⁵ although not all were to the Yellowstone.

The next year, 1812, for example, the Lisa expedition, except for small parties and couriers, did not go beyond the Ft. Lisa on the Missouri near the present North Dakota-South Dakota line. A clerk on that expedition, John C. Luttig, has left an interesting account of the trip upriver and the winter of 1812-13 at that post, with occasional mention of the Big Horn post.³⁶

friday the 11th (October, 1812) early rise, the parties prepared to start. . . Mr. Lorimier, and four for wind River (Big Horn, Mr. Lewis, two engages

³⁵Kathryn M. French, "Manual Lisa," South Dakota Historical Collection, Vol. IV, (Sioux Falls: Press of Mark

³⁶John C. Luttig, Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-13, Edited by Stella M. Drumm, (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1920).

and the trappers for the little Horn in all 18 men.³⁷

On Wednesday the 16th of December, 1812, messengers returned with news of the Big Horn region:

. . . which gave some Satisfaction from their quarters they had by hunting and trading 12 Packs of Beaver in Store, and had purchased ten horses for their Use.³⁸

The post at the mouth of the Big Horn was soon afterwards apparently abandoned, and perhaps had not even been used by the groups mentioned above by Luttig. The War of 1812, the increasing attacks of the Aricara Indians along the Missouri, and unsettled conditions in the trade caused the region to be deserted, at least by large groups with permanent establishments, until 1821, when Joshua Pilcher, who became President of the Missouri Fur Company on the death of Lisa, 1819, built a new post on the site of Lisa's fort on the Yellowstone, calling it Fort Benton.³⁹

In the summer of 1822, our company fitted out an expedition under the direction of Messrs. Immell and Jones, the object of which was to extend our business to the sources of the Missouri. . . . This party wintered on the Big Horn, at Fort Benton; a post established in the winter of 1821, for the trade of

³⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁹ Merrill G. Burlingame, The Montana Frontier, (Helena: State Publishing Company, 1942), p. 49. This is not to be confused with the later Fort Benton on the Missouri.

the Crow Indians, and as a depot for a party of trappers.⁴⁰

There were some 180 adventurers in the party, and in the fall of 1822 some \$25,000 worth of furs were sent down the Yellowstone and Missouri to St. Louis.⁴¹ But in the spring of 1823, returning from trading in the Three Forks area, the party was ambushed near Pryor's Fork on the Yellowstone by Blackfeet Indians. Seven men were killed, and furs to the value of \$15,000 were lost. The remaining stock was floated downriver by canoe or bull-boat after the massacre, but this was a disastrous blow to the Missouri Fur Company. Pilcher tried once more, making a tour to the Northwest in 1828, into the region of the British traders, but on his return to St. Louis he gave up interest in the fur trade.

In the years 1819-20 the word Yellowstone became familiar to almost all American ears because it was the name applied to a famous and popular military expedition that had as its purpose the showing of the strong arm of United States government authority in the Northwest. The influence of the British, the disastrous fortunes of the Missouri Fur Company,

⁴⁰ Joshua Pilcher's answer to questions of a Senate committee, "The International Significance of the Jones and Immell Massacre and the Aricara Outbreak in 1823," A. P. Nasatir, Editor, Pacific Northwest Quarterly, Vol. XXX, 1939, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, p. 104.

⁴¹ Chittenden, American Fur Trade, Vol. I, p. 150.

