

LaBarge Piloted Boat; Culbertsons Known by Author

Alexander Culbertson Met Craft at Old Fort Peck Landing; Mosquitoes Harassed Passengers Day and Night

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BUILDING of the Fort Peck dam across the Missouri and numerous articles and pictures regarding it brings to my mind recollections of the place, the people and incidents connected with it and the trip down the river when steamboats stemmed its formidable current all the way from St. Louis to Fort Benton long years ago.

In the summer of 1873 the United States marshal, Charles Hard, attached a boat whose captain was that famous river man Joseph LaBarge, accusing him, I was told, of having sold liquor to the Indians, a federal crime. Whether the charge was justifiable is not for us at present time to determine, but I may say, if Captain LaBarge were guilty, his was by no means the only boat that indulged in the trade.

It then being August, with the river falling daily, unless he could be exonerated and the boat released soon, it meant that under any circumstances it could not leave Fort Benton that season. Colonel Sanders acted as his lawyer, with the result that he won the case and could leave at once for St. Louis, his home, but delayed to await the arrival of Colonel Sanders' family, who were going east on a visit.

The company consisted of Mrs. Penn, mother of Mrs. Sanders, who bitterly opposed her daughter's going to Montana 10 years earlier. "I shall never see her again," she exclaimed. "Oh, yes you will, mother," her son-in-law replied. "We shall have you out with us in a very short time." This prediction, unlike many, came to be true. Mrs. Penn discovered she preferred Montana to Ohio, living in Helena for most of the remainder of her life.

The river journey being comparatively easy, she seized this opportunity to return for a few months to her old home at Tallmadge, where her only child, Mrs. James Upson, resided. (It may be of interest to note that James Upson was a great uncle of William Hazlett Upson, a magazine writer. Judge William Upson, grandfather of the latter, and my father were law partners for several years.)

Mrs. Sanders took with her her three children, James and Wilbur and Louis, the youngest, a little boy with a large voice. I, who had visited in Helena since February, accompanied the party.

By Coach From Helena
We traveled by coach from Helena to Fort Benton, passing through Prickly Pear canyon, over the toll road owned by King & Gillette. Aside from this road, which greatly contributed to the safety of travel, the devastating hand of man had not as yet destroyed the beauty or wildness of this part of our way.

Near the southern entrance to the canyon was located the ranch of Malcolm Clarke, where James Ferguson and his wife then were living. In the summer of 1873 a party from Helena, consisting of Chief Justice Lucius DeClus, S. Wade and wife and daughter, Major Vail and family, Marshall Hard and his future wife, Benjamin Stickney from St. Louis, Marshall and the Sanders family, Mrs. Penn and myself, took a week's outing in the canyon, making headquarters at the home of Mr. Ferguson. We had a delightful vacation, unmarred by recollection of the grim tragedy enacted there four years earlier, when Indians killed Malcolm Clarke and seriously wounded his eldest son, Horace.

I have heard Horace tell of this incident. Accompanied by an Indian, the two started to round up some horses, when Horace heard his companion singing the death song, and knew at once what fate probably awaited him, as he was in no position to defend himself from the shot that passed through his face, coming out near the ear. He fell from his horse, but did not altogether lose consciousness.

Indians came to see if he were dead, and, deciding he was, hastened away, leaving him to painfully crawl within hearing distance of his home, where his cries brought his sister Helen to his assistance. She dragged him to the house, barricaded the door of his room and dressed his wound. He recovered, dying but recently, when well over 80 years of age.

At Sun River Crossing
On our last morning before reaching our destination, we breakfasted at Sun River crossing, my first view of that river, or of the valley through which it flows. That afternoon we arrived at Fort Benton and went directly to the boat, which lost no time in taking in its cable and making a few hours downstream before darkness.

I do not remember the name of the boat, nor whether it was the property of the LaBarges, although it was certain they were in full control of it, because under Captain LaBarge his two sons served, one in the capacity of steward and the other as pilot. The name of LaBarge is intimately connected with the early days of Montana and also with Great Falls, it being asserted on the best of authority that Mrs. Joseph LaBarge was the first white woman to view the Great Falls.

I was told that our captain brought the first steamboat to Fort Benton. It was many years before I learned it was not Joseph, but his brother, who accomplished the remarkable feat, only to meet death not long afterward on the same river he so successfully navigated.

In 1862 came organization of the firm of LaBarge, Harkness & Co., for trading in the upper Missouri country. Two boats were purchased, one of light draft, the Shreveport, and a larger craft, the Emilie. Harkness' diary records that the Shreveport left for Fort Benton April 30, 1862, the Emilie following May 14, with both boats loaded to capacity with passengers and freight, most of the latter for the Indian trade, which then was very profitable. June 16, at noon, the boats were at Fort Benton, having spent the previous night a little above the mouth of the Marias.

Harkness notes: "The river is now higher than ever known at this time before known; it is a torrent from here to Fort Union. We were 24 days in making the trip from port to port."

Mr. Harkness had his daughter Margaret with him on this initial trip, who shared with Mrs. LaBarge the first sight of the falls. It was quite a distinguished party that left Fort Benton June 30 on the trip. They were "Eugene Jackson, Father DeMet, Giles Pilley and son, Frank, Madame LaBarge, Margaret Harkness, Mrs. Culbertson and her son, Jack, W. G. Harkness, Tom LaBarge and Cadotte, the guide, the last three being on horseback and the others in an ambulance drawn by four mules."

They started at 4 a. m. and in the afternoon met some Blood Indians, relatives of Mrs. Culbertson, who were friendly under the influence of Father DeMet and Mrs. Culbertson. An antelope was killed and cooked for supper, and the party camped for the night.

They started the next morning at about 4 a. m., and reached the falls about 10 a. m. Madame LaBarge and Margaret Harkness left the ambulance, ran to the point where the first glimpse could be had, and are the first white women to have seen the Great Falls of the Missouri. They found the way down to the river with difficulty, and, looking up, saw the falls in all their beauty and grandeur.

I have quoted the Harkness diary at some length, as comparatively few persons now living here and at Fort Benton are familiar with the events narrated.

A fort for the Indian trade was built by LaBarge, Harkness & Co. at the upper end of what is now Fort Benton. And named for Captain LaBarge. The latter, with his wife, visited the town of Cottonwood and was so pleased with its location that he thought of transferring his business to that place. Encouraged by the prospect of a real estate boom, the few persons living in Cottonwood promptly enlarged its boundaries and rechristened the town LaBarge City, the expansive mind of the pioneer, ever hopeful, seeing in every collection of log cabins a future metropolis. This "city" after being surveyed by W. W. Delacy, once more took on another appellation, Deer Lodge, that it managed to retain.

The morning after we left Fort Benton I had the first opportunity of seeing all three of the LaBarges, and made the mental picture of them that time has not blurred. Captain LaBarge was of medium height and stockily built. He was dark of complexion, as we, generally expect Frenchmen to be, temporarily forgetting that many of them are as fair as Scandinavians. With good features, black hair and eyes and dignified bearing, he looked the commander or he was an appearance gained from his lifetime effort to learn the moods of the temperamental Missouri. In this he was fully versed. No other river captain or pilot knew them better.

His son, the pilot, contrasted strikingly with his father, being tall, slender and a decided blond. He was a handsome man, but his looks did not detract from his ability as a pilot. His brother, the steward, seemed to be a compromise in size and complexion between the captain and pilot, although bearing a closer resemblance to his father.

I remember little of the passengers on our boat, with the exception of Fannie and Joe Culbertson, who were going, the one to Bismarck and the other to St. Louis. Their mother, a Blood Indian, mentioned earlier, is said to have been remarkably handsome, and report stated that she, like many of her race in the northwest, had a strain of French blood. Her children inherited their good looks from their mother, and not from their father.

Our trip down the river would have been delightful but for the ceaseless attacks of a host of mosquitoes that harassed us day and night unless the wind blew. They were terrible. Captain LaBarge declared that in all his years of river travel he never saw them so bad. We rarely breakfasted anywhere but on the forward deck, trusting the breeze there would keep them in check. It was useless. We generally took our hot cakes with syrup liberally beset with mosquitoes. We wore our coats tied close to the wrist for protection and should have been provided with mosquito nets. The flying pests tortured the children and Louis Sanders lifted his voice in angry protest, much to the concern of his grandmother, of whom he was the idol.

At Old Fort Peck
Once a few buffaloes were sighted, when every male passenger hurried to get his gun, and there ensued a fusillade that did not harm the buffaloes, while doing the men a world of good. It is unfortunate that we shall never hear the stories they told of their prowess.

We tied up for a short time at the Fort Peck landing, not long enough for any of us to see the fort, which was not visible from the landing. However, we did see Alexander Culbertson, who came on the boat to bid his children goodbye and entrust Joe with a sack of dried buffalo tongues to be carried to friends at St. Louis. The friends never received them all, as Fannie, Joe and I sampled them on our way. Buffalo tongues are not to be despised, but buffalo tongues were far better.

This was the only time I ever saw Alexander Culbertson, and then, know the important part he played in the drama of the fur trade. As I remember him, he was a small man and decidedly Sober in feature and coloring that matched his name for it was sandy. There appeared to be nothing about him to indicate the forceful character he must have been and the history shows. Seeing Major Culbertson proved to be the last notable occurrence of our river journey.

We left the boat at Sioux City and, while awaiting the train, thought of rest at a hotel. Unfortunately, we were to discover the insect pest was not confined to the out of doors. No one dared lie down because of eager bugs the bed discolored, thirsting for blood. That evening we took the train for Ohio.

Some Agents' Wealthy
Before closing, I cannot resist narrating what I heard at Helena regarding an Indian agent at Fort Peck that admirably illustrates the pioneer attitude toward the Indians. This man, of whom I have read laudatory articles, was reported to have saved (?) from the meager salary of \$1,500, or about that, the marvelous sum of \$300,000.

I told this story once to an old timer who knew the man, remarking that it exemplified a remarkable instance of thrift, and I wish to record his reply. It was as follows: "When a man holds such a position he takes his life in his hands, and has to do something to get even. And they, agents and traders, did so with a vengeance, as we are just beginning to find out. Sitting Bull made the discovery earlier and the defeat of Custer was an abortive attempt to equalize matters for his race. The result we know."

Mrs. Martha Plassmann Recalls Early Day Journey Down River

Page 10

THE GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE

Sunday Morning, April 14, 1935