

# *The Splendid Warefaring in the 21st Century*

By Gerry "Lucky" Messmer

## *-Ashley's Return: The Concept - Part 1*

**T**his is the story of three men and an idea that came to fruition in the form of a truly epic journey. From the first step we had no idea what we would face, both challenges and the generosity that would be shown to us along the way. This is the story of the recreation of William Ashley's Return from the Rendezvous of 1825 that would forever change the course of the fur trade era and in 2019 would change our lives.

After 95 days living on the ground and enduring incredibly rigorous conditions, we found the ending of our journey to be bittersweet! It was hard to part ways; many words went unspoken. This journey was exceptional by all accounts, so life changing, and such a feat that I dubbed it "primal survival"

On our journey we would experience the absolute breakdown to that primal level of knowing what you did and did not need and what you could go without, which is about everything. The modern comforts of heat, AC and showers drift away by the hour as you adjust to the conditions of the day and live minute to minute. We would get excited at the thought of sleeping on soft sand, the respite of a breeze to take away the miserable, angry, relentless mosquitos, the comfort and warmth of our wet wool clothing and the companionship of a good horse.

During the sojourn we would endure hot, harsh and dryer than normal conditions on horseback for 700 miles in Wyoming, two days without water, a tornado, 80 mph winds and torrential rain on the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers for 400 miles, then unprecedented flood levels on the Missouri River during our epic 900-mile float on the Keelboat Muskrat. Along the journey we would see black bear, coyotes, antelope, elk, water moccasins, rattle snakes, wild mustangs by the hundreds and catch fish for dinner. Most importantly, we would encounter the generosity and support of many folks that helped us in some way. With these great Americans we would break bread, share our story and forever be grateful to them, they became known as our "angels".

The concept for the expedition gave birth in the mind of Jack "Papa Jack" Mitch in 2016 and stayed unspoken for a year. Jack, like many of us had watched men ride into rendezvous, from a couple days up to a week, but none had ever recreated leaving the rendezvous. Jack's dream, before age caught up to him, was to ride out of a rendezvous.

Papa Jack finally decided to test his idea in June of 2017 in Idaho, high up in the mountains above Montpelier over a cup of hot coffee. Not sure what response he would get, he ran the idea past me. He wanted to recreate riding out of a rendezvous and specifically, recreate Ashley's return from the 1825 fur trade rendezvous that was held on Henry's Fork. All I could say was, "I'm in." From that point on we were committed, and it became one of those things we never wanted to look back on and say, "We should have".

For both of us the timing would be right. The day Papa Jack asked me I was on day three of my terminal leave from the Army as I was retiring after more than 31 years of service. The following year Papa Jack would be retired from his own business. A few weeks after this encounter Papa Jack brought the idea up to Scott "Amish" Staggs and without hesitation he was in. As a self-employed business owner Amish determined he could take the time off. This would complete the trio of men who would accept the challenge and tackle 2000 miles by horse, pirogue/bull boat and keelboat.

We had no idea what we were in for, what Ashley's route was, or the gear and training we would need to be ready. All we knew is that we had committed to this 2000-mile journey in all period correct clothing and gear, hand sewn and true to 1825. The main difference for us in 2019 would be our inability to freely hunt for meat as Ashley and his men were able to do. We would have the extra burden of carrying food with us.

This journey would be a real test of our mettle, of our ability to function as a team while individually enduring the hardships. Many people asked us why we were doing this journey and our response was, why not? Jack, Scott and I all talked at length about the journey and at the center of all the conversations was our individual ability to do something of this magnitude, to simply prove it to ourselves and no one else. This would be 2000 miles with no support, no trail vehicle following us as so many people do, no one carrying our extra food in a cooler or our spare clothes, this would be out in the wild on our own and the only support we did receive, that was never expected, was from local residents, much like the help the trappers received from local Native American tribes.

In the beginning we divided tasks up. I took on the ride portion, working to determine the route and making lists of gear we needed. Papa Jack took on the water portion as an experienced and skilled canoer and kayaker. We also



began looking for other folks to join us. As it would turn out no one wanted to do the entire journey with us. Many folks were outright scared of the water portion, while some were willing yet too old to make the journey and others could not take the time off from work. I think in the end folks knew this was going to be a real challenge with extremely high risks and not something they wanted to face for their own personal reasons.

William Ashley left Henry's Fork on July 2, 1825 with a large number of hides, horses and men. He headed north crossing the Green River and coming to the Sweetwater River he followed it north to Ft Smith, Montana. While in the now Riverton, Wyoming area, he sent men west to retrieve a cache of hides that met up with him later on. At Ft. Smith he would send half the men back with the horses and proceed to shoot 23 buffalo and build bull boats. Of what size and configuration, we may never know. Once completed, Ashley and 25 men then proceed to float down the Big Horn River to the Yellowstone River to the confluence of the Missouri River. Here they would camp for a week while waiting on General Atkinson and his flotilla, upon these boats they would board, load hides and continue to St. Louis.

Our journey would begin on July 6, 2019, 4 days later than Ashley and we would arrive at our destination on

October 8th, four days after Ashley arrived. Our journeys were mirror images in more than just that one way! In fact, we camped at Ft. Union the exact same calendar week that Ashley and his men had camped waiting for General Atkinson and his flotilla to arrive.

Early on we determined that no electronic devices would be used, and if so, only for logistical coordination or emergencies. We did have one fail-safe beacon we turned on at night for one to two minutes that would record our location. This was important because that beacon was connected to 911 should we need a life flight, ambulance or other assistance for a catastrophic injury. One push of a button and help would be on its way. This capability was not optional in discussions with our families, so along it went!

Other considerations we had to contend with were our inability to secure passage through the property of two Native American tribes. One tribe would not allow us to make the last 20 miles through Bad Pass to Ft. Smith, so we had to stop short on horseback. The next problem was a very different Missouri River. The river of today is no longer a mile wide and 3 feet deep, but rather 300 yards wide and 50 feet deep with a steady 7 mph of unforgiving current. Only one stretch of it looked like during Ashley's time, but I'll save that for later.

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To give you a small idea of the logistical requirements of this trip, my truck, which was used for moving our horses, gear and us between start points, drove more than 10,000 miles in 95 days! This does not include the vehicles of the others on the ride portion or those that joined the canoe portion or those that drifted on and off of the Keelboat Muskrat.

Our gear for the horseback portion would require three pack animals to carry it for 700 miles. The gear that we hand made for the journey included, saddles, bridles, halters, a buffalo epishemore, pack saddles, saddle bags, pommel bags, dozens of hand sewn food bags of both cotton and oil cloth, moccasins, shirts, pantaloons, breeches, breech clouts, leggings, rifles or trade guns, horn, bag and

accouterments, powder, shot or ball, a good fire-starting kit, sewing kit, and a bedroll. We would also have to source, buy and carry dried food for six men for 30 days.

While sourcing or making our gear, we began the daily routine of physical training, both man and beast. Bubbles and I started off with 5-7-mile rides, increasing weekly until we were able to do 35 miles in a day. This would prove to be imperative as we would average about 25-30 miles a day on the ride. Papa Jack and Amish would do the same in Indiana. Fortunately, they live close by each other

and could ride together working their critters up to the physical stamina required.


In the summer (June/July) of 2018, Jack and I hauled our critters to Colorado for a rendezvous where we would ride and train together in Colorado. In that short week Harley and Bubbles bonded well and played off each other's strengths.

In March of 2018 Papa Jack and I also met in Idaho at the ranch of Han and Conan Asmussen, father and son team, where we would spend 4 days learning how to load pack animals and working on our saddles to make sure all the rigging was solid. We did one overnight ride in some tough terrain that was quite a confidence builder. Han and Conan are superb horsemen and packers, probably the best in the country, not to mention Conan is a farrier. After long conversations with them, they agreed to do the ride portion with us. Later we would add a veterinarian to the trip, Dickson Varner to round out the talent pool for the ride.

This training session was invaluable as it set the stage for Jack and me on what we would need to make the trip. We went home with long lists of gear, training requirements and the idea that we really needed to minimize gear and pack very tightly and make every bit of space count. With renewed vigor and confidence, we were ready to continue preparations for the undertaking.

In my next section Part II, The Ride, I will take you through our 700-mile ride from start to finish, great stories of the trail and the events that occurred across the wide-open spaces of Wyoming, some of the people we met and the hardships we endured. <sup>MB</sup>

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## *-Ashley's Return: The Ride-Part 2*

By Gerry "Lucky" Messmer

William Ashley made an incredible journey west in 1824-25 to get to Henry's Fork to re-supply his men, Ashley's Hundred, losing one man and nearly losing his own life. Ashley only spent enough time at the first rendezvous to gather plews from his trappers and pack them onto horses and head out for St. Louis, where he would sell them for a handsome amount of money and enter politics.

Ashley did not have enough horses with him to go straight back to St. Louis, so he borrowed 100 horses from his men and took them and 50 men to Ft. Smith and the Big Horn River, the closest navigable water leading to the Missouri River. At Ft. Smith they would send all the horses and half of the men back, build 23 bull boats and float the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers to the confluence of the Missouri River where he would meet General Atkinson and join his flotilla to move his men and furs to St. Louis.

Our group, for the ride, was made up of six men, seven horses and two mules. To understand the team, it is necessary for some brief descriptions. I, Gerry "Lucky" Messmer, am a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel and a lifelong outdoorsman who started trapping at age 11 and continued my outdoor life education as an adult by studying and living in the woods in either colonial or fur trade era gear and spending 65 days in the woods in 2011 over several trips.

Jack "Poncho" Mitch spent his life hunting, trapping, and fishing under the tutelage of his father and was a frequent attendee at the spring and fall NMLRA shoots at Friendship as a young man. Scott "Amish" Staggs also spent his life in the woods and unlike Poncho and I was a lifelong

rider and owning many horses over the years. Both Amish and Poncho are superb woodsman.

Our next two compadres are Han Asmussen and his son Conan. Han and Conan rode from Canada to New Mexico in three segments starting when Conan was 11. Both are lifelong riders, ranchers, saddle makers, horse trainers and Conan is a professional farrier while Han is a homeopathic doctor. The two of them are the finest riders in the country at using pack animals and traveling with them.

Rounding out our group of six is none other than Dickson Varner, Hall-of Fame Texas A&M Veterinarian. Dickson was born with a saddle strapped to his backside and spent many years as a rodeo cowboy/competitor before slowing down enough to attend Veterinary School. Between the medical abilities of Han and Dickson we had excellent medical coverage.

As our horses took their first steps away from our makeshift modern camp we entered the world of William Ashley and 1825. For the three of us it would be hard to separate ourselves from our modern lives and blend into the land before us, into a world most only dream of, but we were ready and at this point turning back was not an option. As we stepped off my stomach was in knots thinking about the 2000 miles ahead of us and the three modes of travel, not knowing the perils ahead.

The first day we rode 30 miles through incredible heat, sage, antelope, and the occasional prairie grouse flying up in front of us. As we rode, we all made note of the lack of grass and water. It had been a very dry year and all the intermittent



Photo by Nicole Morgenthau



Photo by Nicole Morgenthau

streams were dry as a bone. This would be the theme for ninety percent of the horseback portion, some 700 miles long.

Our daily routine was to rise in the morning, restart the fire built from dried sage brush and put a kettle of coffee on to boil. We prepped the coffee pail the night before to save time in the morning. While the coffee was heating up each of us made a breakfast of dried oats in our tin cup or small frying pan. Once it was ready, we would add dried fruit, eat our meal, and then start the process of packing while drinking coffee and sharing an occasional pipe.

We would work as a team to pack all the panniers with our gear, weighing each of them to ensure they weighed the same using a period correct scale owned by Han and Conan. Uneven panniers on a pack horse are a recipe for disaster leading to loads falling off at the most inopportune time. For continuity we paired off for the ride with Dickson and Han sharing a pack animal, Poncho and Amish sharing another and Conan and I the last.

Once the panniers were ready, we would then retrieve our personal mounts from their picket, bring them into camp and saddle them up. Our daily use gear was kept on our own mounts in saddle bags, pommel bags or both. Those mounts would wait tied off to sage while we packed the pack horses and got them ready.

While riding, we each carried our own canteens on our horse with bulk water on the pack horses in large copper canteens. Our lunch was a simple one of nuts and dried fruit in a bag that we passed around at our mid-day stop. It was quick, easy, and full of calories for energy.

Everything we packed had a specific purpose and nothing was duplicated. On a long ride like this every piece of equipment and clothing is calculated out for necessity, weight, and ability to pack it. In fact, we even shared spare shirts bringing one per two men based on size.

Every day we started early, usually at first light and then rode until about an hour before sunset or stopping sooner if good grass and water was found. We averaged about 31 miles per day on the ride and, we all had saddle sores by the end of the first week. They were so bad we were using

cream for horses to paste our backsides to sooth the pain and to try to stop the bleeding. It took mine about ten days to stop hurting.

The route we took was close to Ashley's original route; however we would have to ride farther east than he did due to cities along the route, and we would not be able to ride alongside the rivers as they were all private property with homes on the land. We would ride the BLM land and through ranchers' grazing land who were gracious to us and did not have an issue with us traveling through.

Along the way we would meet many of them and be invited to camp on their land and every single time they offered to share a meal or provided us with fresh meat and

water for us and for our livestock. One rancher met us at his gate and invited us to camp on his lawn as it was the best grass for miles, as he informed us. He said, 'just follow my driveway to the house'. That

driveway was 8 miles long! At his home his wife cooked us an amazing dinner of chicken fried steak, asparagus, all the tea we could drink and many other treats. She followed this in the morning with pancakes, coffee, and the biggest plate full of bacon any of us had ever seen.

Along our journey our encounters with folks were simply incredible. We called these folks our "angels". They would call ahead and inform the land-owners along the route of our presence, and they would be on the lookout for us. I am convinced we could have made the journey with nothing but water and we would have easily been fed daily. The generosity of these angels was simply heartwarming. We cannot even begin to explain kindness shown to us along the way. America!

On day 7 we had ridden along Pacific Creek and arrived at Pacific Springs. Pacific Springs is a marsh in an otherwise desolate and dry landscape just west of South Pass. On the property there is an area that has excellent grass and was used for many years by settlers heading west, the old cabin still standing. We walked our horses out onto the grass and we all sat in the saddle while the critters grazed in green glory!

After a couple minutes I looked down at the ground and was amazed at what I saw. The grass was rolling like waves under our feet! I looked at my trail pard Conan and asked him if he had looked down? He did so and we passed the word around, nobody moved. Now what? Here we are

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*Photo by Nicole Morgenthau*



*Photo by Nicole Morgenthau*



*Photo by Nicole Morgenthau*

halfway across this green plush field that was nothing more than floating sod. The spring had flooded the field and in a rare phenomenon had raised the turf with 4-5 or more feet of water below. These mats of "floating grass" are called "fens" and are very rare in Wyoming.

We decided we would each pick a path to attempt to make the cross. Dickson took off and let his pack mule Curly go so he could make his way. Both arrived safely on the other side breaking through the sod along the way in three feet of water. I had chosen to move off to my right on my horse Bubbles. We made about 20 yards before she broke through in about 4 feet of water up to my knees. I calmed her down and we stood there for a moment before I gave her some spur and she leapt out of the marsh taking me safely to dry land.

Han had let his pack animal Yuma go as well so she could find her own way. She had real bad luck and had broken through in an area that was so deep it was over her head. With her packs on she was about to drown in the water. Conan jumped off his horse and ran to her aid pulling the packs off her while Han kept her head out of the water. Han and Conan tried pulling her out to no avail. Then Dickson threw them a rope and he tied it off to his saddle horn and he put his horse Wishbone to work pulling her out. In an instant Wishbone lost his footing and went down landing on top of Dickson pinning him in the mud. We all rushed to Dickson's aid relieved he was ok.

Back to Yuma. This time Amish and I went to help her out. She had about given up and was so weak she could barely keep her head above water and was about to go under for the last time. Amish grabbed the pack saddle and started pulling while I pulled on the lead rope. We were able to

get her to slide up onto some solid floating turf to give her a break. Just as she seemed rested enough to try again the sod broke and she went in again. This time though, she was able to touch the ground and leap to safety.

After a few minutes of rest, Han checking out Dickson for injuries, and repacking Yuma we were back on the trail having lost about 2 hours of time.

On day 11 we came upon a small lake in a bowl with a ridge around it. As we approached the lake was full of cattle watering accompanied by 40-50 antelope and 50 elk. We moved slowly as we approached but the elk and antelope still scampered off. We rode by the cattle letting our horses drink their fill and then headed over the ridge. As we crested the ridge we came across another incredible sight before us. In our view were 6 or 7 different herds of wild mustangs moving about. You could tell each herd from the other by the dignified bell mare leading them and the stallion sheepishly off to the side.

All totaled we estimated somewhere around 200-250 mustangs in our view. It was a beautiful sight to see and sitting on top of a mustang myself all I could think about was would my horse long to be with her relatives? Alas she was happy with me, and we rode through them without incident. Just in case that evening we used all three of our bells hanging them on the mares as our early warning that a stallion was in our pack string while they were picketed out.

On our 15th day after 35 or more miles, we happened on a ranch originally known as the Hayes Ranch. We had met one of the hands who introduced us to the ranch manager. We needed grass and water in a bad way, and they gave



*Lucky Sleeping.*

overabundance of trees and shade. As he mentioned this, we were riding past the Branding Iron Saloon that had an outdoor overhang area, so we turned around and asked permission to show our horses in the shade.

They graciously granted us permission, so we stopped, tied off the horses and Conan went to work shoeing. We spent about 6 hours there taking care of the horses that needed shoes. For me, I spent most of the time asleep trying to recover from whatever was making me sick. The folks we met at the Branding Iron were a lot of fun. We must have told our story to dozens in those six hours, to people that really enjoyed the history.

Once we were done with the shoes and ready to move on one of us got the bright idea to ask if we could ride through the bar on our way out! The manager called the owner who said, "why not". So, after saddling up, Han, Conan, Amish, and I rode in one door, past the pool table and the guys shooting pool, past the folks having dinner and to the bar where they handed us all a drink on our way out the other door.

Our final day we rode into Lovell, WY. Along the way we were stopped by a family that had been looking for us for two days. We pulled up along the highway in the grass and spent time with them and their son who was dying to meet us. They came bearing cold drinks and snacks. It was a very nice visit with some great folks. Once again, the generosity was overwhelming.

We made our final camp, retrieved trucks and trailers, and made sure everyone had their gear back. It was a somber evening. We had completed 700 miles in 22 days and had become a team, friends, great friends, and we were not ready to part ways. For Han, Conan, and Dickson it was back to their ranches and their work, for Amish, Poncho, and I it was on to Ft. Smith to build a bull boat and start the next phase of William Ashley's journey. MB

us permission to camp on the ranch. This was one of the highlights of our trip meeting the family and camping on the ranch that Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid would come to for fresh horses. The barn they went to originally stood about a half mile from where we were camped. In the morning the dad dropped off his 6 and 8-year-olds with their horses to ride with us. They were some fine young riders and rode about 8 miles from our camp to their house chatting the entire time.

July 25th, our 20th day of the ride we had six horses that needed shoes very badly. We were riding into Greybull, Wyoming on a day so hot you could fry an egg on the pavement. I was sick as a dog and half asleep in the saddle as we rode. As we rode through town Conan was remarking about how miserable it would be to shoe six horses out in the sun. The Greybull area is not known for an



*End of the ride.*



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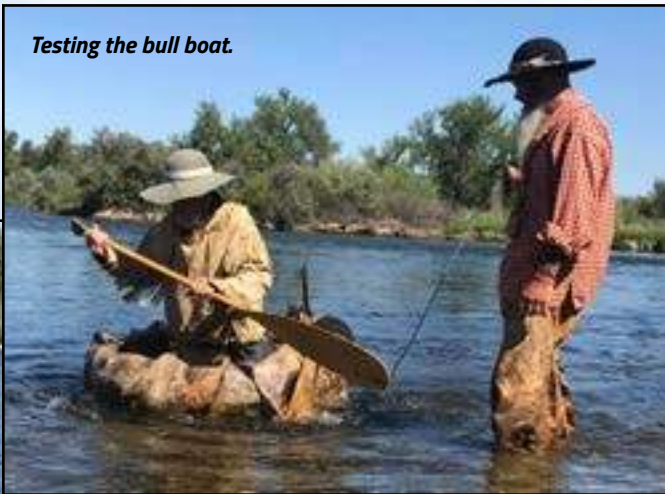
## *-Ashley's Return: The River-Part 3*

While the end of the ride and leaving good friends was a bittersweet moment, the next leg of our journey on the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers breathed a new life into us. Exhausted and physically beat down from the

ride Poncho, Amish and I had five days to rest before we started again. Incidentally, William Ashley had been at Ft. Smith for exactly five days to make his bull boats.

This break allowed us time to sort gear, re-pack, mend clothing and equipment and to complete the arrangements to have our three horses sent back to Indiana. Pat and Donna Ingram would take us to Ft. Smith, Montana, our start point, and then take Ponchos' Mule, Harley, to a new home in Denver on their way back to Indiana, and graciously care for our horses for the next two months.

*Testing the bull boat.*



*First Day!*



The first task in building the bull boat was to get our dried buffalo hide into the water to re-hydrate it. Simultaneously, we had to soak the willow branches which we brought with us to make the frame. Ashley and his men would shoot, it is believed, 23 buffalo and build bull boats of some configuration to move him, 23 men and as many as 100 packs of beaver pews. The exact number has never been determined. Amish, Poncho, and I would build the boat in a few hours. She was not as perfect as we imagined Ashley's would have been, but Ol' Runaway, as she would come to be known as, made the entire trip.

The few days had really dragged on leading up to the start of the canoe trip. As we put the pirogue in the water and loaded and secured our gear the water was brisk as the snow melt water was still making its way down stream. However, after nearly a month of riding through the Red Desert and surrounding areas with minimal or no water, we were excited to have fresh water every day!

Amish was the first to give the bull boat a try. Fearlessly, he climbed in and started down the Big Horn River as Poncho and I would man the pirogues. We had two, which we put together in a catamaran fashion like they did with dugouts in 1825. This configuration did make it hard to maneuver especially when rowing into a headwind, but due to their height it would be more stable and safer.

The first day was much like the first day of the ride, a serious learning curve. Amish found the bull boat nearly impossible to steer and he was pretty much at the mercy of the current. Within an hour or so, Amish floated quietly past a black bear that had made its way to the water to drink and look for food. It waded in with little interest in Amish, walked a bit downstream and then disappeared into the woods again. As we moved quietly down the river we would see not only that black bear, but many ducks, geese, pelicans, deer, osprey, and several magnificent bald eagles.

Our first night, Poncho and I pulled off to river left to camp just before the first diversion dam at Two Leggings, which we would find help to portage around. Amish was behind us and as he saw the diversion dam, he pulled off

to river right to camp for the night. He started a nice fire to warm by and that also let us know he was ok. While Amish was building the fire and setting up camp the bull boat broke from its tie from the strength of the current. Poncho and I happened to be watching in despair as it floated out of sight! This is when it became known as Ol' Runaway! We thought for sure it was gone and we would never see it again. The next day we found Ol' Runaway was about six miles downstream and no worse for the wear. We tied it on the bow of the pirogues to dry out in the sun as she was quite waterlogged.

On August 5th, we would make what would be our most miserable and exhausting portage on what seemed like the hottest day on the river, easily approaching 100 degrees at mid-day. As we approached the diversion dam, we had to make a choice of going to the right or left of a huge island. We chose left. As we pulled off to river right on the bank of the island the only spot we had to land was against a very high bank, probably 10 to 12 feet high. Given the situation we had to unload and dismantle the pirogues and drag or carry everything up the bank and down the island about a quarter of a mile to re-assemble them in the water, reload and resume the journey.

As we started working, we realized that the journey had taken its toll on us. None of us were as strong as we were a month ago, weak from the day-to-day efforts of what I call "primal survival". Early to rise, packing, unpacking every day, riding, or rowing, gathering wood, constantly moving to get things done. For folks who do living history and go to the woods for the weekend, perhaps even a week, as we all had previously done, there is no comparison to the efforts required to make a journey like this. Once you get beyond a week or so, eating scant food, your body begins to break down. You lose weight and muscle mass and must adapt to the changes.

Quiet days went by after the portage and working up an appetite for some fresh food, Amish caught a couple of catfish and I was able to harvest a squirrel, and to top it all off we slept on a sand bar that felt like a mattress. It's the little things. We cooked up the squirrel and shared the abundance of meat.



*Author relaxing.*



*Catfish dinner.*

*(Continued on page 52)*

The day of the 11th and the subsequent night we would experience one of the most hair-raising events of the entire 2000-mile journey. Now on the Yellowstone River we were floating in a rainstorm and pulled off to river left to sit out the storm. The three of us hunkered down under Russian olive trees with our rain ponchos on. It seemed like the rain would never stop as we listened to the pitter patter of the rain bouncing off our hats onto the ground. The landowner, Ed Beyl, came by and we introduced ourselves. He enjoyed our story and later would bring some friends down to the river to meet us as we launched again. Here he gifted us an abundance of elk meat. What a treat!

It seemed like an eternity as we rowed into a strong headwind. Exhausted, we pulled off on an island just before dark and set up a camp to ride out the storm. A quick meal of catfish was enjoyed before piling into our shelter. Because Ed had warned us the severity of the storm, it was decided a flat camp would be best to know that a lean-to would never withstand the winds. With the ground cloths laid out we climbed under a large oilcloth tarp pulled over us in an attempt to conquer Mother Nature, or merely survive.

The three of us had chosen not to bring blankets on this leg of the journey. In the autobiography, "Journal of a Trapper", by Osborne Russell he makes comment of riding into a camp in January, in the Rocky Mountains, where most of the trappers did not have a blanket and were curled up close to their fires to stay warm. In a group decision to put our metal to the test, we did the same. It was a challenge, but not a regret. If you don't challenge yourself, how do you know what you can conquer?

As we lay on the sand sleep was scant, the water was pooling in our makeshift bed, and we were all soaked to the skin and cold. The relentless rain was penetrating everything coming down sideways and with a force that made us hold tight to the oilcloth over us in fear of losing it. Poncho was on the windward side, Amish in the middle and I was on the leeward side of the bedroll. At one point, curious about our gear and the damage the wind was doing I looked out only to see the logs from our fire flying down the riverbank three feet off the ground and out of sight as the water doused them into a cold death.

The debris hit my face like a sand blaster forcing me to retreat under the thin layer of protection. Somewhere in the middle of the night, with Amish fast asleep, Poncho and I heard that sound you never want to hear in the wilds, the sound of a freight train signifying a tornado! All I could think about was how we were out in the open and if the tornado picked us up, would they find our bodies? Unbeknownst to me, Poncho was wondering the same thing. He was wondering if the adventure was worth it only to be flung miles away to our death in a shallow grave where our bodies would never be found.

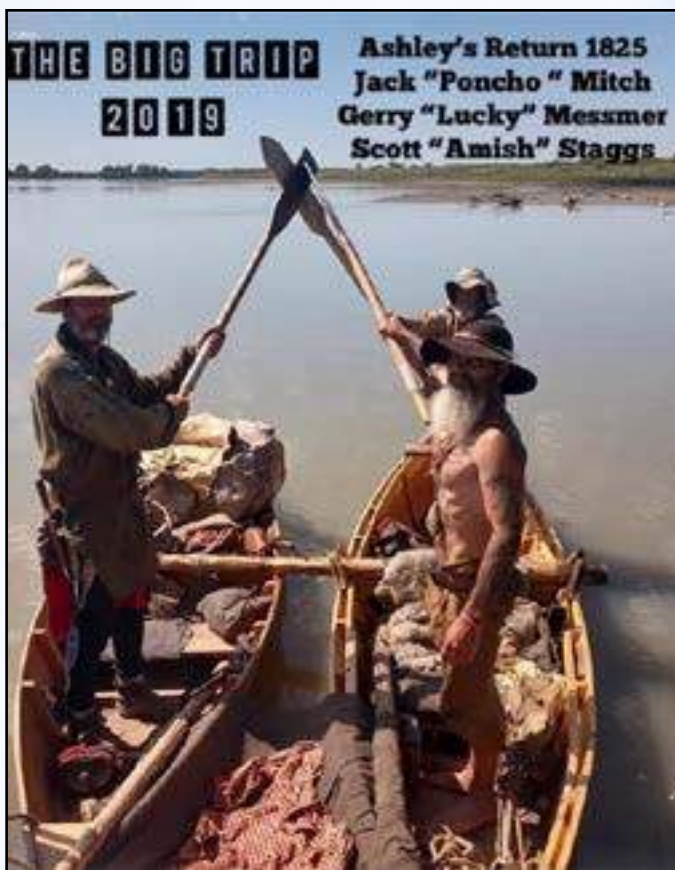
The morning found us cold, shivering, and miserable, and our fire from the night before had disappeared without a trace. It was completely gone, not even a small piece of charcoal to help our quest for fire and coffee. Everything was soaked except our food bags. Our provisions were in individual cotton bags that were then stuffed in-

side oil cloth bags and then placed into a larger oil cloth bag creating a double barrier. We laid out our tarps, most of our clothes and went to work looking for anything dry to make a fire.

As a team, we scavenged the island to no avail, unable to find dry material to start a fire. Eventually Poncho and I found and hacked our way into a dead cottonwood tree until reaching dry wood, prying out a few small pieces with our cold, stiff hands. Taking them to the beach where Amish had begun collecting small, but wet sticks, we went to work with our flint, steel, and striker. Finally, we got a small ember to hold in the wood by taking turns blowing on it to keep it aglow, slowly building the intensity with a fragment of heat drying out the small branches Amish had gathered. After about an hour and a half, through teamwork and perseverance, we had a fire.

With success at hand, we admired the flames while we slowly began to dry out. Wasting no time, we put the coffee on and waited for the elixir to boil. In short time we all had a cup in hand, and it was the best cup of coffee any of us had ever had! We cooked up a breakfast of oats, repacked our gear and headed down the river. Later that day, a local resident would confirm that the storm sported 80 mph winds and the tornado we heard had decided to spare us and had skipped over that section of the Yellowstone River before touching down again.

In mid-August we would encounter another of the 7 diversion dams and we would need help to portage around. Walking over a mile, Amish and I went to look for help.



Arriving at the Missouri River.

The owner answered the door and seeing us in our rough state of dress and smell, we took a minute to explain what we were doing. Without hesitation, another angel volunteered to help us! He worked alongside of us to move our gear to a spot where we could safely re-enter the water.

Making another 5 miles or so, we pulled off the river to make camp before dark. The location we chose happened to be right across the river from the August 1st, 1806, camp of the William Clark camp that was on his way to meet Meriwether Lewis at the confluence of the Missouri River. Jack and I woke the next morning and stoked the fire for coffee. While doing so we had the most curious sight. Upstream about 200 yards a coyote had made its camp for the night on a sandbar. We stood in silence and watched him as he slept, eventually waking to stretch and trot off without any concern for our presence. Perhaps he enjoyed the company for the evening. While scavenging for firewood we kicked up a herd of deer that had been bedded down a short distance from us. All in all, we would see about 10 bucks ranging from four to ten points with only two does in the group. We made 22 miles before camping for the night. Much to our chagrin it was another rainy night. We made the best of it listening to the sound of the coyotes serenading us in the distance and the beaver slapping their tails in the river.

Our final day on the Yellowstone River was a calm day with no wind and no current. Poncho was on the rudder while Amish and I paddled non-stop for the last 9 miles, exhausted and approaching the Missouri River it was clear why there was no current. The Mighty Mo was so flooded it was pushing water upstream into the Yellowstone River. Slowly we crept forward scanning the confluence and deciding our path.

Entering the confluence of the Missouri River, Amish and I paddled hard in the raging waters of the Missouri. Poncho aimed us upstream and at the last minute turned the pirogue downstream to make a safe landing on the left bank of the Missouri River. Poncho's lifelong experience on rivers made the difference between a safe landing and potential disaster.

Our crew landed the same day and time, mid-day, just as William Ashley had on August 19th, 194 years later. This portion of our journey had been the most solitude we would experience. It was also the portions that required the three of us to bond as a team and survive. Each day a test, each night a respite from exhaustion, but dependent on each other, just as Ashley's men had been. We encountered many "River Angels" who helped us and became lifelong friends. Before meeting up with the Keelboat Muskrat we would spend five days at Fort Union in a teepee meeting with and educating the public. Ironically, one of the Park Rangers who helped us put up the teepee was a direct descendant of the Native Americans who had attacked Ashley and his men, stealing their horses. He reassured us we would be safe at Fort Union! Now we had to meet the Keelboat Muskrat for the final 900 miles of the journey. MB



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# *The Splendid Warefaring in the 21st Century*

By Gerry "Lucky" Messmer

## *-Ashley's Return: The Keelboat Muskrat- Part 4*

Have you ever had someone say something to you that was so outlandish that you nearly dismissed it or spit out your drink? When Jack and I were discussing the journey that is exactly what happened to us when our friend Bill Bailey said, "I'll build a keelboat". Bill has built many historically correct forts, restored log cabins and barns his whole life, but had never built a keelboat, although, as he noted, it was on his bucket list.

year of work into it. At first, he was reluctant to Captain the boat, but after talking to him he agreed to make the journey with us, and thus became known as Captain Bill.

Having seen very few pictures of the Muskrat being built before we left, we had no idea what she would look like. When he pulled up, it was like a dream! Before us sat a keelboat built exactly the way they were in 1825 and even painted with historically correct paint colors. He used all proper materials and most importantly, techniques. Our Muskrat, which was one of the boats in General Atkinsons flotilla, came in at about one third to one half scale at 35 feet and a dry weight of about 5500 pounds. Now the time had come to put her in the water for the first time ever. This would be interesting, because the original Muskrat sank twice on the Missouri while Ashley was with the Atkinson flotilla going from the confluence of the Missouri River to St. Louis. Both times she was repaired and put back into service.



***Keelboat in progress.***

Once he made the commitment, Bill dove right in researching, talking to builders that made boats of the era, and reading books about keelboats on the Missouri in his free time. Bills business, as a master craftsman, takes him all over the region to worksites, so he would need to be able to bring the boat with him. He acquired a boat trailer, modified it for the weight and began building it in the evenings after work, often using trouble lights to see. His efforts were no less than heroic juggling jobs with customers, building a keelboat on the road and maintaining his family life. It is a small glimpse of his impeccable character and unequivocal work ethic.

By the time Bill met us in Yankton, SD to launch the keelboat, now named the Keelboat Muskrat, he had about a full



***Keelboat almost finished.***

As Bill backed the trailer slowly into the water, we had to figure out how to get it off the trailer due to its weight. The big question was, could he get the trailer far enough into the water to float it, or would we need to figure out another method to lift the Muskrat off the trailer? Fortunately, he was able to get far enough in as he had extended the tongue for clearance of the bow when towing it behind his truck. As we floated the Muskrat, we kept the trailer in the water



*In the fog.*



*Captin Bill.*

as we assessed her. Unfortunately, the Muskrat began taking in water right away, which was not unusual considering the period build method and the fact that she would need to swell to close the gaps in all the planking. The water was coming in too fast, and something needed to be done.

The original boats had a lifespan of about 5 years. Many of them sank or burned, but once they went in the water they never left, otherwise the planking would shrink and never swell again to close the gaps. And so it would be with the Muskrat, this would be her only journey and after she came out of the water Bill intended to donate her to someone for a museum to live on in an educational role. That day would come, and I'll cover that next month.

We had to determine where the water was coming in. Bill spent a few minutes assessing the situation and pinpointed the leaks, so we set out to fix them. This would be the first of many uses of the tar and oakum he brought with him. By the end of the 900 miles, we would all spend hours in the bow or stern filling holes at the end of a day. The muskrat was true to the period, she leaked from the top, the bottom, and the sides!

Once we had the leaks patched, we put her back in the Missouri River and commenced the loading and preparation for the next day's launch. We estimated about 3000 pounds of gear was loaded on at the beginning, and even at that, she only drafted about 13 inches of water. The crew and boat were now ready, and Captain Bill, apprehensive

and nervous, was set to float her down the Mighty Mo.

A small group of folks, no more than 10 or 12 stood on the dock at Riverside Park in Yankton to bid us farewell. As we pushed off, we all had no idea what the coming days would bring. We knew the Missouri River was flooding, but we had no idea it was 22 feet above flood stage. The flood of 2019 would set records in 42 locations, claim three lives, and nearly claim the Keelboat Muskrat and her crew. Also, important to understand is the difference in the Missouri River Ashley traveled on and the river of today.

They used to say the Missouri was a mile wide and three feet deep. It was a very different river with ever changing braiding and depths. Keelboats of the day could use sails a bit, pull them by rope and have hunters following along on the banks hunting.

Our Missouri River experience would be much different. First, upriver there were 5 dams and lakes we could not travel on. Keelboats are made for rivers and are not stable enough for windy

lakes with high waves. Next, the Missouri River had been changed into a barge canal by the Corp of Engineers as was now only about 300 yards wide and 40 to 60 feet deep, without flooding. We could not pull it by rope, could not drink the water and we could not hunt for food, so we had to carry all our provisions. Finally, the current is three times that of 1825 at a constant 7-8 mph when at normal levels.



*A peaceful stop.*

*(Continued on page 52)*

We launched into a strong headwind and had to pole and row hard to get out and away from the bank of the river. We encountered many deadfalls and stumps and the water was about 5-6 feet deep. The first few days we would experience the Missouri River just as Ashley and his men had in this initial segment. It was still the braided, shallow, and a wide river in its glory, untouched by human hands to turn it into the canalized barge canal it would become a few days ahead of us.

We made 28 miles before pulling over to camp on the Nebraska side for our first night. After a flawless landing by Captain Bill, we made camp, cooked a meal, and had our first encounter with the mosquitoes of the Missouri River. Everything you read about them in history books is still true. They are mean, relentless and exist in numbers

Muskrat from running aground. Looking back over the stern the sun, shining through the fog, formed a halo over the back of the boat, a welcome sign of hope. Looking off the port and starboard sides we could not see the banks of the river and had no idea how far away they might be. It was a moment that took us all right back to 1825 and the hazards Ashley and his men faced. It made us realize how you don't have control over Mother Nature and in a split second you could perish, being pulled down into the brown, murky water of the river to a grisly death.

We crept along riding the gentle current, pushing away floating debris, and making our way through the mysterious and dangerous fog. After several hours we slowly emerged from the fog hanging over us, delighted in that we had kept the Muskrat in deep water and were no longer



*In perspective.*

we were sure outnumbered the stars. We would have very little respite from them and on many mornings, we woke to pocked faces from mosquito bites while trying to sleep. We all slept on shore the first night except Captain Bill, who would always sleep on his boat.

After a breakfast of coffee and oats we had a smooth launch and headed to Vermillion. After about an hour we headed into a left bend in the river, and as we did so a heavy fog started to set in. At this point the river was very dangerous with many deadfalls and floating debris and is the only stretch that resembled what Ashley encountered in 1825. We would only use the oars to keep our bearing and allow the current to move us. Almost instantly, as we entered the fog our visibility dropped to 30 feet or less. We lost sight of the banks, and all were on high alert with our poles to push away debris or to push the Muskrat away from a stump or trapped deadfall.

You could have heard a pin drop as we all stared into the fog trying to find our way and to ensure we kept the

in danger of running aground. The sun never looked so good. We made about 32 miles before stopping for the evening to enjoy black beans, rice, corn, and ham in a stew. Just before dark the "flying needles" began their assault on us as we tried to get some much-needed rest.

When studying the journals of General Atkinson and William Ashley, during the keelboat journey, it is interesting to note that they would launch each morning, travel for several hours, and then stop for breakfast, launching again to travel until midday, stopping for a noon meal, launch again and travel until just about dark before stopping for the night for dinner and rest.

On our fourth day we made it to Omaha, NE riding the crest of the flood. As we made our approach to land at a downtown marina, the only safe place we could find, there was a 911 Memorial on the shore but now underwater. I was standing on the bow with a rope in hand; ready to jump onto the dock as we drifted toward the Memorial. In the final moments before making the landing it seemed as

if we were going to hit the Memorial. All I could envision was the 8500 pounds plowing into it, smashing the boat, and toppling the beautiful Memorial while the current ruthlessly pounded away at the wreckage. As we came within 10 feet, all I could think about was, how in the hell are we going to pay for it? This was an independent journey, not sponsored, no insurance and I was running through my mind what I could sell to pitch in my portion for restoration. Not even in my mind was our safety or damage to the boat, just paying for that memorial! In the last second, Captain Bill, using the current and momentum of the Muskrat made his final turn into the marina landing us smooth and safe with the skill of a seasoned sailor.

dragoons from St. Charles and the regular garrison under the command of Captain Eli Clemson, built the Fort in 1808 to serve several purposes. It functioned as an outpost in the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase, housing soldiers to guard the new territory and to protect the United States Factory Trade House there.

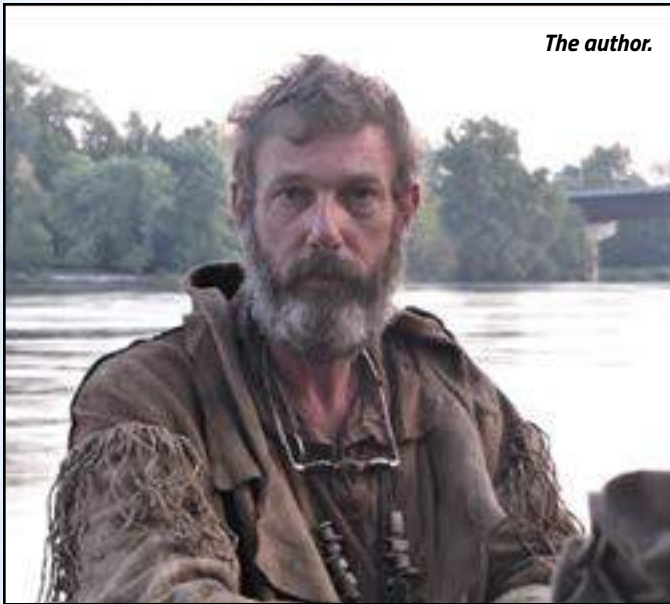


*With friends at Ft. Osage.*

Fort Osage also aided the American government in be-friending the area's Osage Indians. Finally, the Fort offered Missouri's first settlers a sanctuary from which to venture westward. Under the direction of George Sibley, trade flourished at the Fort, and relations with the Indians grew stronger. The Factory, a three-and-one-half story high trade house, reflecting the French Colonial architectural style, was one of the few operated by the U.S. government without financial loss. In keeping with the old legal term, Sibley served as the Fort's "Factor", keeping track of the dollar value of each exchange.

By 1822 however, private traders who resented the Fort's competition lobbied Congress to end the Factory System. Because the lobbying proved successful and because settlers pushed the frontier further west, both traders and soldiers abandoned the Fort by 1827. Since Ashley went through in 1825 on Atkinson's flotilla, it is entirely possible that they stopped here for at least an overnight. Walking up from the river it made your hair stand up thinking Ashley and his men may have walked up the same or nearby hill to the fort for a break and some evening spirits. It would be a grand stop where we met many familiar faces who greeted warmly and where we certainly enjoyed some lively spirits and jollification in the evening. We did spend a bit of time working on the Muskrat and I spent more than two hours in the bow repairing a hole with hammer, cut nails, tar and oakum.

Fort Osage is a gem along the Missouri River and for those who enjoy history, it is a "must see" location well preserved and with many educational events. Next month we will continue the Journey of the Keelboat Muskrat, some near miss experiences, stops along the way and our final landing. <sup>MB</sup>



*The author.*

The next morning, we were informed that during the night we had received 4-6 inches of rain, the river was expected to crest in two days, and that three levies had broken up-river from us. To make things worse, the Mighty Mo was under a flood watch. We were all soaking wet, our gear wet and with no respite from the rain in sight we launched and continued our sojourn.

After a 52-mile day we landed at South Table Creek for the night. This was a great opportunity to layout all our gear to dry and sleep on shore. From the information given to us we expected the river to rise about 12 inches, but we were surprised with only 1-2 inches. We found out that the levy's that broke spilled over the sides of the banks of the river dissipating the water. During the night the Muskrat continued to take on water and I was up at 2 AM bailing her out and then again at 5:30 AM, not much sleep, but at least the mosquitos weren't bad.

We departed South Table Creek and headed out to make Indian Cave. Although we had the ability to bathe on the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers, here we had not. Most of us haven't bathed in the river in at least ten days. Needless to say, the Muskrat was getting a bit musty.

Several days later we would land at Fort Osage in Sibley, MO. Under the direction of William Clark, joint commander of the Lewis and Clark expedition, 80 volunteer



# *The Splendid Warefaring in the 21st Century*

By Gerry "Lucky" Messmer

## *-Ashley's Return: The Keelboat Muskrat- Part 5*

After leaving Fort Osage, we only made about 30 miles. All were tired and we needed some sleep. While in camp we had 6 water moccasins come visit us. All were very large and came within mere feet of us totally unafraid. In fact, the next morning when we departed one of the larger ones followed us for quite a while. We could not decide if it was mad at us or wanted to board us, nonetheless, we did not stick around to find out. Eventually it dipped under water never to be seen again.

One of the more harrowing moments was when we landed at Glaskow. We had been informed that a railroad bridge had collapsed upstream from us. Later we would see footage of the crew cutting the tracks to save the abutments along the shore and over a quarter mile of debris backed up and putting pressure on the bridge.

We landed and immediately went to work unloading our gear. We had no idea how much debris we would see but didn't want to chance the Muskrat being sunk with all our gear on it. In a worst-case scenario, if that happened, we would secure canoes and finish the journey. Later in the evening, a local resident spent some time with us and pointed his truck lights onto the river. What we saw was astounding! We saw giant islands of debris and railroad tracks floating by three times the size of the Muskrat. The next morning, we would have to join those islands of debris to continue our float. We would all have poles at the ready to push away as needed.

A couple days later we would land at Boonville. While floating into land, some local militia from the Arrow Rock Stock and Trading Company fired off their firelocks from shore signaling us. Little did we know, these men had planned a visit for us on private property to visit the grave of William Ashley! Before visiting the grave, we would get an up-close and personal tour of the Village of Arrow Rock, MO. Arrow Rock is another "do not miss" if you are a fan of the fur trade era and western expansion. Because of its association with westward expansion the entire town was designated a National Historic Landmark.

One of the tours we were allowed to make, even though it was closed, was to go inside of the Huston Tavern, restored in 1923 and the oldest, continuous running tavern west of the Mississippi River. Arrow Rock also has the distinction of being the only historic town with an original gun shop and the gun makers home, both well preserved.

At the grave site of William Ashley, the Arrow Rock Stock and Trading Company men would treat us to roasted venison leg, potatoes, rice, and apple cider. It was an amazing feast. Ashley is buried in an old Native American burial mound that was on his property. In fact, the entire property we were on belonged to Ashley before his death. In his last will and deed paperwork, it is noted that Ashley maintains a five-inch easement from





his grave to the Missouri River. He said if he were ever resurrected, he wanted to be able to walk on his own land back down to the Missouri River.

Another interesting fact about William Ashley is that after one trip back to St. Louis, he was frustrated at being shot at from the riverbanks at ranges his weapons could not equal. If you recall a December 27, 1987, issue of *Muzzle Blasts*, Bob Woodfill would pen an article about this rifle. Bob's research would tell us it was serial #1 by J&S Hawken. Bob gives a great description of the rifle, but it has never been seen. We all guessed that he was buried with it. It makes sense if he wanted an easement to access the Missouri River, that he would want his rifle to make the trek. This is only a guess, perhaps it will show up one day.

October 4th, happy birthday to me, I turned 55. We saw a white coyote pup on the bank as we floated toward Hermann, MO. Here in Hermann, they were celebrating their annual Oktoberfest, so we became celebrities of sorts, being loaded on another keelboat for their parade. We met the mayor who immediately expressed his desire to take the Keelboat Muskrat as a donation to continue its life educating people about life on the Mighty Mo. Eventually, terms would be agreed to, and Hermann would become the permanent home of the Muskrat. To this day, you can still visit Hermann to see the Keelboat and other artifacts from the journey we



left behind.

The next morning, we would be whisked off by more locals to visit New Haven and the Colter Museum. We also passed by an original 1780's trading post, but it was not open to tour.

On one day just before ending the journey, we encountered a huge whirlpool where trees and a sand bar had broken loose at the bottom of the river. As the sand broke away it created a void in the river, dropping the water level about 5 feet sucking the keelboat into it. The whirling of the river was violent, and our 8500 pounds made no difference to the water. As we dropped down,

we all held on and waited for the outcome. The whirlpool would come back up and spin our keelboat 90 degrees and set us all back down perpendicular to the banks.

Events like this made us realize how important our life jackets were. Again, the Mighty Mo is a much different river from

1825, and nothing to take for granted. If you fell in there was no standing up in three feet of water and walking to shore.

As we closed in on St. Charles, we would all take a very cautious approach, no rash or bad decisions. For the

*(Continued on page 52)*



three of us, we had come 2000 miles by horse, canoe, and keelboat without the slightest injury. No one even cut themselves in camp. We had been wet, cold, hot, thirsty, out of water and conquered about everything you could think of on the journey but had not lost a drop of blood.

As we approached St. Charles, we all looked forward to meeting our girls. Kim, Shannon, and Cathy had been amazingly stalwart in supporting us and we were able to make this journey because of them. As we landed for the last time, we were all amazed we had done it, completed Ashley's Return as close to absolute period proper as humanly possible. Our landing was one of the best and after tying off the Muskrat we would all jump to shore to the welcoming committee.

While on shore, a nice lady came to the waterfront to see what was going on. She had heard our gun shots in the air, saw the commotion and drove down. We met her, the fourth great granddaughter, direct descendant, of John Colter! What a pleasant surprise.

The next three days would consist of emptying the keelboat, loading our gear into our own vehicles, and getting back to civilization. Getting the keelboat on the trailer was extremely precarious. Since it had been floating it had absorbed quite a bit of

water, sealing the planking shut. We had serious concerns the trailer would hold it, but try we had to do. As we backed the trailer in, we fastened lines to it, lined it up and began pulling it onto the trailer. We could see the suspension stressing under the weight and we all cringed.

Alas, we had it loaded and left it for a few hours to drain out. Because the Muskrat would be going onto a life in a museum, it would never float again. Putting it back in the water would be fruitless as the planking would never seal up tight again. Such is the case with all the original keelboats. They had an average lifespan of five years before sinking on their own or becoming so dilapidated that they were dysfunctional. MB