

Prairie du Chien and the Changing Role of the Mississippi

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Approximately one hundred miles west of Madison lies a small southwestern Wisconsin town called Prairie du Chien. The second oldest settlement in the state, the history of the area is very rich indeed. Nestled between the bluffs which flank the Mississippi River, Prairie du Chien (a French term meaning "Prairie of the Dog") remains a very active river community yet today. It is the river which undoubtedly was most responsible for the settlement of Prairie du Chien and continues to play a major role in the local community.

Imagine walking along the banks of the Mississippi River in Prairie du Chien during the 17th and early 18th centuries. What would you see? Well, first of all, you would probably find the local Native American populations (including Fox and Sioux) carrying out their daily practice of acquiring a living from the river and its bounty. Fishing, hunting, and trapping were ways in which the Native Americans acquired food, clothing, and material for their shelters-wigwams. Often made of animal skins draped over a u-shaped bowed-frame, wigwams were easily taken down and set up, allowing the people to move as the land and its resources dictated. Out on the river itself, the men would be traveling in birch bark canoes, reaping its benefits to provide for their families. Rarely taking more than they needed to survive, they lived quite harmoniously with "the great river," treating it with respect and dignity. Their ideology was one of subsistence, not exploitation. It is true that the Native Americans greatly manipulated the resources of the river; however, they did so in such a way that they left very few permanent scars on the land. In fact, other than what can be found in local museums, there is not a great deal of physical evidence left of the once thriving Indian communities of the area.

Walking along the same river bank a few years later, you would notice a number of changes in the landscape. As European settlers (primarily French) arrived, the river remained very important, but in a slightly different way. Indians continued such practices as hunting and trapping, but with different

motives in mind. No longer were they hunting and trapping for their own subsistence, but they were harvesting animals which often ended up in the hands of the white settlers. It must be understood that when these Europeans arrived, they not only brought with them their families and possessions, but a general European desire for New World goods as well. Chief among these goods was fur. Beaver pelts for hats and coats were in great demand back in Europe, and this allowed many settlers to make a living by participating in the fur trade.

To protect their interests in the fur trade, the Europeans constructed a military fort known as Fort Crawford in 1816. (The original fort was named Fort Shelby and later called Fort McKay, but it was evacuated and later burned by the Indians.) Fort Crawford, a large, two-story structure, still stands on the island today. It is only one of quite a large number of early European structures which still dot the landscape around Prairie du Chien.

Most of the fur traders lived in rather crude dwellings. Today, one can speculate about the sort of lifestyle the traders lived by observing the land around these dwellings. Very few, if any, of the settlers had great tracts of land for farming. This seems to lead to the conclusion that they were intensive rather than extensive farmers. That is, they probably grew a few crops in small gardens which were used for their own subsistence, and were not sold for profits. The river and its fur trade remained the primary source of economic wealth. A walk through the area of Prairie du Chien known as Saint Ferirole Island allows you to view some of the log homes built by the early French settlers.

By the middle of the 1800's, however, one trader was far beyond all others in terms of wealth and living conditions. That man was Hercules Dousman. Although Dousman initially became wealthy through his investments in the railroad, he made quite a name for himself in the fur trade, along with his partner, Joseph Rolette. Today, there is still evidence of Dousman's business activities in the area. His old fur trading house,

now a museum, remains much the same as it was over a century and a half ago. The trading house and the area around it create a setting which allow you to turn back the clock and return to the days when Native American and European traders alike walked onto the shore, carrying armloads of furs into the old trading house to be inspected by the men working there. After inspection, the furs would be bartered for necessary supplies like tools and food. Even today, when biking or walking on the island, I can sense a certain mystique about the area. When I see the trading house facing the Mississippi, with the log homes and the old Brisbois Motel in the background, it almost makes me feel as though I am there, experiencing the sights and sounds of the 1800's.

The most noticeable sign of Dousman's wealth was not his fur trading house, but his actual home. Like many of the other traders, Dousman lived on Saint Feriote Island. Unlike the other traders, however, he owned an awe-inspiring Victorian mansion which he called the Villa Louis. Due to the constant threat of floods on the island, Dousman built the Villa on a large mound. One can only imagine the well-to-do Dousmans climbing into a wooden raft to reach the "mainland" during the floods that so often plague the island in April and May. As recently as two years ago, Saint Feriote was entirely covered with water as the mighty Mississippi swelled beyond its banks. Just as it had done when Hercules himself lived there, the Villa Louis sat dryly atop its mound like a castle surrounded by a giant moat.

It was not until European influence came into play that the river changed from a source of subsistence to a source of monetary wealth. With that wealth came a sort of social hierarchy. Before the Europeans came, none of the Native Americans really were more wealthy than the others because they were not interested in profits, but subsistence. The European system, however, created a sort of class structure with people like Dousman at the very top and the small-scale European and Indian traders at the bottom. The irony of this system was

that those who were involved in the actual trapping of the animals for their furs benefited least, while those like Dousman, who owned the trading companies, made a fortune.

Today, if you were to walk along the same river bank on Saint Feriote Island, you would see that the land has changed dramatically since the time of Hercules Dousman. Only a few of the log cabins built by the trappers and traders remain, the rest have either been torn down or destroyed by years of wind, rain, and floods. The once sandy beach in front of the old fur trading house has now been filled in and cemented in order to prevent the constant sloshing of waves from eroding the bank which now is the site of a city park. Asphalt and gravel boat ramps break up what once was a seemingly never-ending shoreline. Green and yellow buoys mark the deepest part of the river which has been dredged to allow the barges to pass. Canoes and wooden rafts have been replaced by gasoline-powered fishing boats, ski boats, and cruisers. Clamming, commercial fishing, and pleasure rides aboard replicas of the old paddle-wheelers which cruised the river in the days of Mark Twain have replaced the fur trade as the major economic activities on the river. However, there are still those who engage in trapping and the fur business, but for most it is a hobby and not a way of life.

Saint Feriote Island itself is definitely no longer the thriving place that it once was. The area has been declared a flood zone, and the last of its residents have now moved. What once was the heart and soul of Prairie du Chien is now primarily a tourist area, virtually its own museum, with basically only Fort Crawford, the Villa Louis, the Brisbois Motel, and the old trading house remaining.

The river undoubtedly remains very much a part of the lives of Prairie du Chien's residents. Even though most no longer depend on it for survival, it remains important in other ways. Primarily, it serves as an escape, an escape from the commercialized and industry-based life which is located away from Saint Feriote Island, but which has come to dominate the

town. I have spent many summer nights on the quiet, secluded backwaters of the river myself, watching the bright orange sun slip behind the bluffs to wait for the next day to arrive. I have seen flocks of geese fly overhead in the autumn as their natural instincts take them south to avoid the bitter cold winter months that lie ahead. I have seen the warmth of springtime melt the frozen winter tundra and once again grant the river its freedom to flow.

The land is like a giant history book. It has seen more things and contains more knowledge than any one person can ever acquire, and that is what makes it so wonderful. In today's fast-paced world, few people take the time to appreciate the true wonder of nature. Whether you are on the Mississippi River, in a giant oak forest, or in a tall grass prairie, you can experience the land and its story. Just sit down and look around you, and the pages of the book will begin to turn themselves.