
The Missouri River

D&C 61: Introduction

Soon after the first Church conference was held in Jackson County, Missouri, Joseph Smith and ten elders started on their journey to Kirtland, Ohio. The first leg of the journey was paddling canoes on the Missouri River. On the third day, Joseph's traveling party reached McIlwaine's Bend in the river, where "many of the dangers so common upon the western waters manifested themselves." At the bend, William W. Phelps had an open vision of the Destroyer "in his most horrible power, rid[ing] upon the face of the waters." Joseph Smith wrote that "others heard the noise but saw not the vision."¹ In this revelation, the Prophet Joseph Smith learned that he and his companions should not travel via the river but journey by land, "pitching their tents by the way" (D&C 61:25).

McIlwaine's Bend is no longer on the river. Through the years, the course of the Missouri River has altered. Engineers have straightened and deepened the river. By so doing, McIlwaine's Bend disappeared, as did other shallow hairpin turns and sandbars. It is estimated that the Missouri River now flows a mile away from its 1831 course.

Although the Missouri River is often viewed as a tributary of the mighty Mississippi River, the Missouri River is the fourth-longest river system in the world and the longest river in North America. It rises in the Rocky Mountains and flows in a southeast direction for 2,341 miles before entering the Mississippi River north of St. Louis, Missouri.

Writer George Fitch said of the Missouri River, popularly known as the "Big Muddy":

There is only one river with a personality, a sense of humor, and a woman's caprice; a river that goes traveling sidewise, that interferes in politics, rearranges geography, and dabbles in real estate; a river that plays hide and seek with you today and tomorrow follows you

¹ History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], 142. Joseph Smith Papers.

around like a pet dog with a dynamite cracker tied to his tail. That river is the Missouri.²

Today the Missouri River watershed—an area of land that separates waters flowing to different rivers and basins—is home to a population of over 13 million people. This includes the entire population of Nebraska; part of the states of Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming; and small southern portions of the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. With more than 170,000 square miles under cultivation, the Missouri River watershed holds one-fourth of all agricultural land in the United States.

By the nineteenth century, the Missouri River roughly defined the American frontier, particularly downstream from Independence, Missouri. All the major trails that opened the American West (the California, Oregon, and Santa Fe trails) had their starting points on the river. By the 1830s, large mail- and freight-carrying vessels ran regularly between Kansas City and St. Louis.

Through the years, the dangers associated with the Missouri River have not lessened. The Missouri basin has suffered a series of catastrophic floods. In 1903 the river flooded and destroyed crops at an estimated damage of five to seven million dollars.³ In 1927, in response to continuous flooding, the US Congress appropriated \$325 million for flood control. In that same year, the Red Cross set up centers to provide shelter for refugees driven from their homes by flood waters. And so it has been on the Missouri River to the present day.

² George Fitch quote, in Robert G. Athan, *The High Country Empire: The High Plains and Rockies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 89.

³ B. H. Roberts, "The Fulfilment of a Prophecy," *The Improvement Era* 6, no. 11 (September 1903), 806.