

Somewhere Down the Lazy River

Many experienced adventurers know that it's hard to move up a river, but sometimes it is down-right dangerous to go down river. When Sgt. John Ordway and Captain Clark parted ways on July 13, 1806, his party's major irritation was the mosquitos. 170 years later, the Great American Flatboat Expedition of Montana's centennial year met with near disaster just a few miles downriver from the headwaters when the cabin of the flatboat was severely damaged while trying to navigate under a bridge.

But one of the more obscure river adventures took place in 1915 when Herman Johnson and Craig B. Whitehead, both of Trident, decided to boat from the "Cement City" to the Gulf of Mexico. They started out on July 1, 1915 in a small canvas canoe, intending to camp along the way and stop in Fort Benton. In Fort Benton they planned to trade in the canoe for a motor boat and finish the trip in style. They chronicled their adventures with letters to the Three Forks Herald.

The rapids for the first few days were just warm-ups for the "dead-man's rapids" near Hardy, MT. The pair floated into the deadly zig-zagging current strewn with boulders before they realized it, but "Herman handled the boat like a veteran and we made it without hitting a rock." From there to Great Falls, the duo rowed most of the way because of the slow currents.

Writing from Oswego, MT, the pair were aboard a light-weight motor boat, but still had to deal with sand bars. Finding anyone to buy supplies, especially gasoline, made getting through

the Little Rockies somewhat difficult. "We will be in Oswego all day and rest as it is a hard trying trip through the badlands of Montana and we deserve a rest."

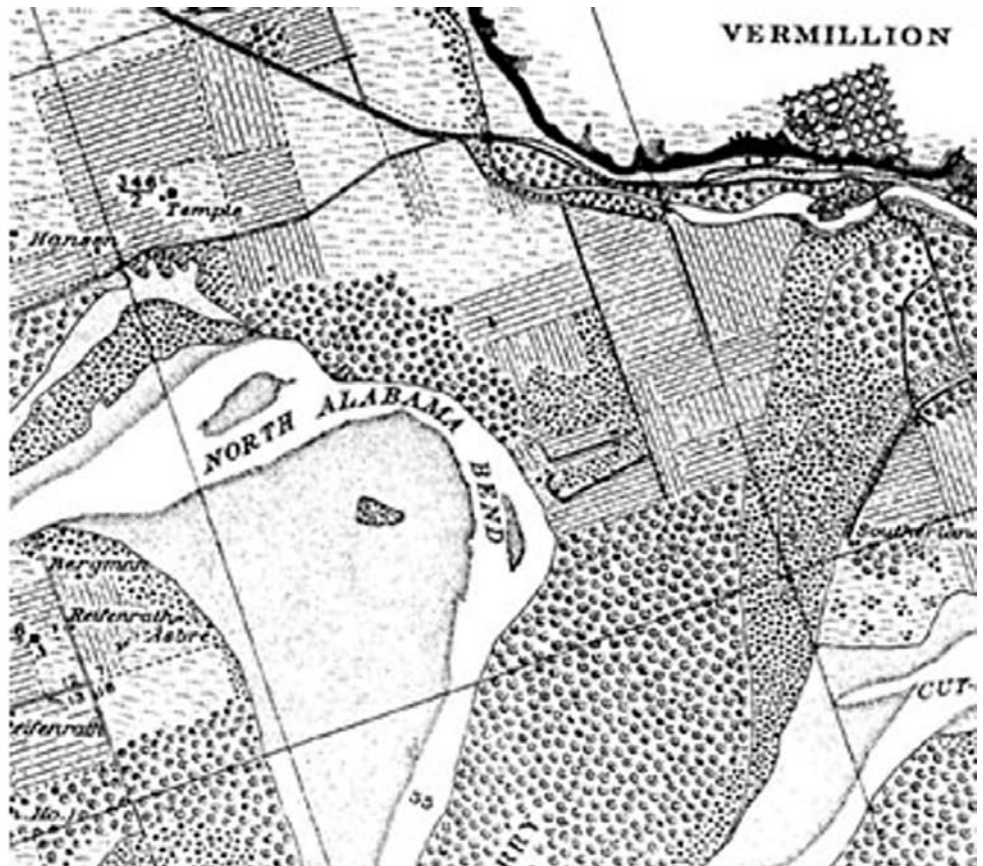
The duo arrived in Bismark, ND on August 15, passing several steamboats along the way. A falling bank just below Poplar nearly had them, but the motorboat was able to avoid being capsized. While in Bismark they met Captain Marsh, a river pilot of over forty years, who spun tales of the past for the pair.

The pair had apparently met up with one of the most famous riverboat captains on the Missouri River. Captain Grant March was skipper of the steamboat *Far West* which had brought wounded soldiers down river from Custer's defeat at the battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876. Marsh had worked with Samuel Clemens onboard the *A.B. Chambers* and served on 22 riverboats in his career. One his boats, the *North Alabama*, which sank in 1870 near Vermillion, SD, was found in 2003 by a local farmer.

The intrepid adventurers reached New Orleans about October 23, 1915. Nothing appeared in the Herald to chronicle their adventures between Bismark and New Orleans, but Herman Johnson stayed on in New Orleans and took a "contract of laying pipes for the city and has supervision over a crew of colored brethren" for the winter. His second in command, C. B. Whitehead (brother to Dr. Whitehead of Logan), headed back to Montana immediately, with a brief stop-over in St. Louis.



Captain Grant Marsh



1892 Missouri River Commission map shows North Alabama Bend, named after a steamboat wreck that occurred at that location.