

CHAPTER 11

BOLD ADVENTURE ON RIVER, TRAIL, AND RAIL

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(Transcribed by Jim Thoma)

A Keelboat Race for Riches, With Death the "Consolation" – Other Pioneer Craft on the Missouri – The Golden Age of Steamboating and Its Many Phases – Triumph, and Tragedy Along the Santa Fe Trail Starting From Franklin and Boonville – State Coaches, The Pony Express and the Coming of Railroads – A Serious Blunder in Community Building – Thomas Hart Benton Reverses Himself and Adds to His Renown, Point West and Exclaiming, "There Is the East; There is India!"

AS THE MISSOURI ran free of ice, in the spring of 1811, Manuel Lisa, West Indian Spaniard and sea captain, made ready at St. Charles for a 1300 mile dash upstream in a 20-ton keelboat.

Accepting a heartbreaking handicap of 19 days, he left St. Charles April 2, a rich fur trade the prize for the winner and probably death for the whole outfit the penalty if he lost.

It was eight years before the advent of steam transportation on the Missouri and five years before the first steamboats were to navigate up the Mississippi to St. Louis. Captain Lisa's craft was equipped with mast and square sail to utilize favorable winds and with poles, oars and cordelle.

A cordelle is a heavy line or rope attached to the top of the mast for men to tow from the bank. It was used much along canals and on the Missouri when going was tough. Where bluffs made this impossible, poles were used.

WILSON P. HUNT commanded the rival expedition for John Jacob Astor. It had four boats, manned by 80 French Canadians, veterans of daring in the Lachine Rapids of the St. Lawrence.

Captain Hunt's lieutenants were: Ramsey Crooks, noted fur trader; Robert McClellan, lauded everywhere for his scouting in "Mad Anthony" Wayne's Indian campaigns; and Pierre Dorien and his Indian wife, interpreters.

Thomas Nuttall, British botanist famed even today, and John Bradbury, Scottish scientist, were passengers, sending back day-by-day narratives, published in London and Paris.

From the records of John Jacob Astor, Washington Irving immortalized Hunt's crew in his volume, "The Astorians".

HUNT took his crew to the mouth of the Nodaway, above the site of St. Joseph, and established winter quarters. He returned to St. Louis early in the spring to get the mail.

There he learned Captain Lisa was preparing a relief party to aid Lisa's partner, Andrew Henry, who, during Lisa's absence from the Upper Missouri, had been chased west across the Rockies by Sioux Indians.

Conditions were unsettled in Siouland. In 1808 Crooks and McClellan had contested with Lisa and Henry for the Indian trade there. Each pair charged the others with supplying the Sioux with weapons to fight the competitors.

Hunt had bribed Dorien to break his contract with Lisa to go with him on the 1811 voyage.

Lisa had but one boat, manned by 20 French oarsmen from St. Louis.

Castor, a Kaw famed as the best shot on the Missouri, was hunter for Lisa's expedition and provided feasts from bear, deer, elk, groundhog, goose, duck, pelican, pigeon, brant, turkey, squirrel and skunk.

Interpreters were Troussaint Charboneau and his Indian wife, "Bird Woman", who were with Lewis and Clark on the trip to the Pacific.

Henry M. Brackenridge, federal judge, foreign diplomat and early American historian, was a passenger and wrote a fascinating day-by-day account, published in Baltimore.

ADVENTURE a-plenty was mixed with a heart and back-breaking battle continuing for months, for 15 miles upstream was a good day's travel.

Bluffs and bottoms along the Missouri were a continuous, monotonous forest with occasional breaks where the fire had ravaged timber. Not always did crew and passengers feast on wild game. The usual repast for the boatmen consisted of hominy for breakfast, a slice of fat pork and a biscuit for dinner, and mush with a pound of tallow in it for supper.

To discourage attack from tribesmen there was a swivel on the bow and two brass blunderbusses in the cabin.

Most of the cargo was ingeniously concealed in a false cabin. The articles for the Sioux trade included blankets, strouding, lead, tobacco, knives, guns and beads.

ENCOUNTERING many obstacles and overcoming hardships, Lisa's single boat kept gaining on Hunt's flotilla for four until he was only four days behind when he passed the James river in the present South Dakota. But Siouxland was not far away.

Lisa sent Charboneau to cut across country afoot, avoiding curves of the river to overtake Hunt and propose that they travel together for mutual protection.

Charboneau overhauled the Astorians in two days and returned, assuring Lisa that Hunt would await for him at a village of Poncas.

After Charboneau departed, Hunt became alarmed that Lisa was so near. Fearing duplicity, he redoubled his efforts.

ARRIVING at the village, Lisa was enraged. No longer did he hearten his French oarsmen by singing a nonsensical French ronde about a price, ducks and a shepherdess, a ditty still enjoyed by peasants in the land of the Dionne quintuplets.

Instead, he fired them with his courage and filled them with his fury. His oarsmen became supermen.

Hunt reached the Sioux first, gave them presents and told them a boat trailed them with only 25 men. The Sioux let Hunt continue and planned to ambuscade the 25.

But Lisa's men, contrary to custom, rowed all night. They passed while the Sioux slept.

The morning of June 2, Lisa's men, exhausted, slept while Brackenridge climbed a cliff and sighted the Astorian camp not a mile beyond.

HIS REPORT electrified the weary men. Locks creaked, oars splashed. The keelboat moved round a bend. Then the Dakota prairies and bluffs resounded to explosive French as the straining oarsmen burst into the ronde.

As the keelboat swung alongside the camp, Brackenridge jumped ashore to greet Bradbury, with whom he was friendly. They induced Lisa and Hunt to form a truce and join forces to journey's end.

Lisa's crew had set a record of 1300 miles upstream in 61 days. It is retold today on levee, deck and barge. Lisa's demigods averaged 22 miles a day upstream. The saga of that voyage is to freshwater sailors, what Ulysses' wanderings were to ancient Greeks.

KEELBOATS and flatboats were forerunners of steam. Even cruder craft carried to St. Louis salt manufactured by Nathan and Daniel Boone, Jr., in 1808, almost opposite Boonville. Canoes, Piroques, bullboats, bateaus and mackinaws were used. The piroque usually was dug out of a cottonwood log. The bullboat's crudely shaped frame was covered with buffalo hides. The bateau was flat-bottomed and tapered toward stem and stern. The mackinaw, flat-bottomed and with pointed prow and square stern, often had a sail as well as oars.

The year before Manuel Lisa achieved the impossible, Robert Fulton urged the legislature of Upper Louisiana to grant him an exclusive franchise for steam craft on waters of the territory. But ancestors of Show-Me Missourians rejected the proposal.

Nine years later Captain John Nelson brought the steamboat *Independence* up the Missouri to Franklin. THE MISSOURI INTELLIGENCER, printer there, said in part:

“With no ordinary sensations of pride and pleasure we announce arrival this morning (May 28, 1819), of the elegant steamboat, *Independence*. . . . The important fact is now ascertained that steamboats can safely navigate the Missouri river. . . . Missourians may hail this era. . . . Boats may bring to this part of the country the articles requisite to its supply and return laden with products of this fertile region. . . .”

Less than two weeks later – June 9, 1819 – *The Western Engineer* arrived, outfitted by the federal government for scientific purposes, to navigate the Missouri and establish a line of forts to the Yellowstone. Steamboat traffic grew slowly. Much commerce was by keelboat. In 1831, long after Franklin had disappeared, only five steamboats ascended the Missouri to Boonville.

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PIONEER STEAMBOATS were crude and small. A barge-like hull housed a low-pressure engine with one smokestack. In swift current the crew poled. In the 1830s steamboats became more numerous, larger and more luxurious. Improvements came rapidly. Shortly they were floating palaces.

Food was excellent. Steaming black coffee as an eye-opener, was served in staterooms. Hospitality afloat became a tradition. Music, dancing and cards enlivened the leisurely voyage, making it a glorified house party. The river gambler and card shark was an habitu  of some boats.

Long, sun-drenched days. . . . breezes blowing freely. . . . serene expanses of water. . . . nights of revelry. Many boats had bars.

Aristocrat, merchant and flush stockman were aboard. It was a deliberate age of plenty. At wayside landings roasting ears and ripening apples could be had for the taking, and, with the donor’s hearty approval, corn on the cob and dumplings were added to an already elaborate menu.

WALTER BENTON WINDSOR recalls a foray on an orchard in which his shirt-tail served as an apple cart for the little Katie Keith, daughter of Captain George Keith.

The steamboats then were marvels of marine architecture. The larger ones were about 250 feet long with a 40 foot beam, and accommodated 400 passengers and 700 tons of freight.

Between two tall stacks with ornamental tops was suspended gilt letters or other decoration. Atop the hurricane deck the texas was exclusively for officers. Above it was the pilot house.

The cabin for passengers was snow-white with deep, colorful Brussels carpets. The ladies’ saloon always had a piano. With either a brass band or string orchestra aboard, tables were removed from the dining saloon after the evening repast and a dance was held. The Virginia reel was the favorite. The social features had charm and elegance.

Afloat, deck hands chanted folk tunes or spirituals. In port they laughed and speeded the tempo of drudgery when the band played. The bellowing second mate had to whisper oaths and epithets with passengers in earshot. The shambling roustabouts chuckled slyly when he thus pulled his punches.

DR. CHARLES SWAP of Boonville was born aboard the *Cora Kinney*, April 23, 1865. He and his mother were removed to Lexington the same day. A few hours later a snag ripped the boat’s hull and it sank.

The river’s romance lured; its dangers challenged. Pilots, hearty and lovable, combined virtues of frontiersman, navigator and mine host. Those on the Missouri commanded high respect from pilots on clear water, regular channel rivers.

The successful pilot avoided existing sandbars, predicted where new ones would form and had an uncanny sense for avoiding snags.

CAPTAIN HUNTER BEN JENKINS, dean of western river pilots, recalled: “The Dakota came down the Missouri to St. Louis with 16,756 sacks of wheat flour and one-half feet of water and never set a spar on the whole trip... Pilots were paid up to \$2,000 a month.... Youths would work for nothing and pay a pilot a couple of thousand dollars to teach them.... There were no electric lights. We carried a torch basket of resin on starboard and another on the larboard side.”

Older residents of Cooper County remember Captain Jenkins and his kinsmen, Captains George and Henry Keith. All were friends of relatives of this writer.

Other well known pilots included the La Barges, Masseys, Tebeaus, David L., Charlie and John P. Keiser, Henry and Ed McPherson, the Yores, Dillons, Lafayette and Robert Burton, Ed Baldwin, Bud Spahr, the Homan brothers, "Bos" brant, "Ras" Wright, Bill Lingo, Ed Kennedy, Thomas Hale, James McKinney, Mike and Joe Oldman, Tony and Lew Burbach, Captain Shaw, Joseph Kinney and, most popular of all, according to Hunter Ben Jenkins, Captain Jewett, who died of cholera at Glasgow in 1849

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DAVID L. KEISER was the father of John P. Keiser of near Bunceton and of Harry B. Keiser of south of Boonville.

Boonville and Franklin contributed others to the ranks of great pilots. Captain Kinney owned a fleet of boats named for his children. He built the Kinney mansion north of Boonville. His family resides there.

Captain Bud Spahr was six feet, six inches tall, well proportioned and of handsome nien. He commanded the U. S. S. *Suter*, Missouri river snagboat, until his retirement. His widow resided in Boonville many years.

Among boats built in Boonville were the *Morning Star* in 1877; the *Annie Lee*, 42-ton stern-wheeler, 1876, owned by Horace Kingsbury; the *Minnie Thomas*, 20 tones, 1881; and the *Marie*, 23-ton motored stern-wheeler built in 1913, and owned by C. H. Dunnivant.

The latter was one of at least eight boats sunk near Boonville. The *El Paso*, 180-foot 267-tonner, was a total loss at White's Landing from a snag below Boonville, April 10, 1855.

The *Bright Light*, 733 tons, struck the Katy bridge June 30, 1883, drifted disabled to Sombart Island where it was beached and the machinery later removed. The hull was repaired and taken to St. Louis as a barge.

The *Mettamora* was sunk by a snag on the north side of Franklin Island below Boonville, September 27, 1875, and was a total loss.

The *Joseph Kinney* was jinxed by bridges. It struck the Boonville span between 1872 and '76, losing the pilot house, texas and stacks. Repaired, it collided with the Kansas City bridge in 1876. In 1882, it hit the Glasgow bridge and sank. Dr. Charles Swap recalls it was a floating palace, fit for a Cinderella's dream.

The *Martha Stephens*, used in local trade from the Lamine to Jefferson City, capsized after being improperly loaded with wheat at Sombart Island. Henry Hoefler of Boonville and a colored deck hand lost their lives. Captain Henry McPherson was master and "Bos" Bryant pilot.

The *Henry Wohlt*, 67-ton stern wheeler, sank New Year's day, 1910, when breaking ice crushed its hull a-starboard. It was raised and repaired.

The *Velma*, seven-ton motored stern-wheeler, was lost in high wind off Boonville, March 15, 1918.

The *Marie* sprung a leak and sank October 14, 1920, while lying up for the night at Boonville.

SEVEN BOATS sank near Arrow Rock and tow between there and Boonville. The river was strewn with wreckage like the Santa Fe Trail with bleaching bones.

From 1834 to 1852, St. Louis newspapers reported 27 steamboats exploded their boilers, killing 1,002 person. From then to 1870, fatalities numbered 3,100 from 54 wrecks. In 1864, the *Sultana's* boilers killed 1,647, mostly returning soldiers.

Fifty or more lives were lost in each of 14 other disasters, including explosions on the *Ellen McGregor* in 1836, and the *Blackhawk* in 1837.

THE MISSOURI BELLE went to a watery grave because of buttermilk. Putting in toward a landing where her whistle always was a signal for a bucket of buttermilk from a farmhouse, she struck a sandbar and sank.

The captain fastened the whistle lever to blow distress while steam lasted. Pompey, the colored boy, arrived on the bank as the expiring gush of steam echoed lugubriously. "Land sakes!" he exclaimed. "De Belle's a-sinkin' an' callin' fo buttermilk wif her last breff!"

IN 1871 THE MISSOURI had 71 regular run boats, next year 62 and the following 37. Rail lines were taking toll. A few boats stayed until after turn of the century. Attempted revivals were brief.

At river traffic's flood-tide favorites for passenger traffic included the *Morning Star*, *Polar Star*, *Ben Lewis*, *Jennie Lewis*, *Fannie Lewis*, *Wm. J. Lewis*, *Post Boy*, *Cataract*, *Meteor*, *New Lucy*, *Cornelia*, *Minnehaha*, the *Clara*, *Emma*, and *Martha Jewett* and the *F. X. Aubrey*, named for the hero of the dash from Independence to Santa Fe.

The *James H. Lucas* traveled from St. Louis to St. Joseph in two days and 12 hours.

In 1879, the *Dakota*, *Wyoming*, and *Montana* were built to "regain the mountain trade". Too large, they failed against the railroads. When the Keiths and Hunter Ben Jenkins possessed them they gamely tried to compete between St. Louis and Kansas City. Low rail rates and high boat insurance defeated them.

CAPTAIN JOHN PORTER operated a Boonville ferry from before the Civil War. A Southern sympathizer who spoke his mind, he was accommodating to both sides and got along fairly well. However, once when he was in midstream, a Union battery sent a cannon ball across his bow.

Porter, short but fearless and aggressive, ruled the Boonville waterfront with noisy

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Expletives, for decades. Through Joe Stephens, a banker with political influence, he defeated an effort to have the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad bridge built to accommodate pedestrians and highway vehicles.

When Captain Porter retired, James, one of his three sons, succeeded him. John also was a river man. Cook, the other son, was a lawyer.

Later the ferry came into possession of Ernest and Bud Sombart. Jake Walther, veteran carpenter and master ship-builder, constructed for them the *Helen*, one of the best built boats on the river. It operated until July 4, 1924, when the highway bridge was opened.

MR. WALTHERS also built the *Alda* for W. B. Eades in the local trade. The *Head Light* was operated by Boonville men to Jefferson City as a tri-weekly connection between the north end of the Boonville-Versailles Branch line railroad and the Missouri Pacific at Jefferson City. It was discontinued when the river route of the Missouri Pacific was completed as far west as Boonville. Captain Polston was master and W. J. Homan pilot. Captain Nick Smith, hearty, rollicking master of the *Nadine*, in the Lamine river and local trade, was almost as big as his boat.

In Boonville's palmy days as the most important river port west of St. Louis and also the western terminus of the Boon's Lick road from St. Louis and eastern terminus of the Santa Fe Trail, huge warehouses bordered Wharf Hill and the courthouse lawn. Most of the supplies for the entire Southwest were handled through Boonville.

EFFORTS to salvage treasure lost in the Missouri have been futile. Late last century a company directed excavations for 300 barrels of whiskey and other cargo buried with the *Twilight* 20 miles below Kansas City in 1865. A changed channel put the wreckage a half-mile inland.

With long steel rods, workers probed through 30 feet of silt, locating the hull. An air-tight caisson was built over the hatches. Several bottles of Old London Gin, 1860, were brought forth, and pronounced excellent in Kansas City clubs. Soon "*Twilight Whiskey*", mellowed by age, was advertised by Kansas City saloons. None ever was recovered. Salvage was abandoned.

Steamboats of St. Louis registry in 1871 were valued at \$5,428,800.

EARLY COMMERCE by water made Boonville a big port and started the Santa Fe trade in the early 1820s. Major Stephen Cole, first adult white male settling south of the river in this section, was killed in the trade by Indians on the Rio Grande in 1824.

Pack and wagon train outfitting founded many Boonville fortunes. Wholesalers, retailers, harness-makers, saddlers, cobblers, blacksmiths, wagonmakers and dealers in draft animals thrived.

For decades prairie schooners creaked up the cobble stoned Main street hill. A pilot on the prairie was a hickory grove on a broad knoll that give the present Pilot Grove its name.

This was *the original Old Trails route*, from “Civilization to Sundown”. Soon other river ports became starting points. Westport,

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An important terminus, helped develop the present Kansas City.

MAJORS, RUSSELL AND WADDELL, Missourians, contracted to freight 16 million pounds across the plains for \$2,500,000. They used 4,000 wagons, 50,000 oxen and 1,000 mules.

Their drivers, receiving rations and from \$25 to \$50 a month, signed contracts not to swear, drink, gamble, mistreat animals or do anything unbecoming a gentleman, under penalty of discharge without pay.

As nearly as practicable a wagon train had 30 wagons, each drawn by 12 oxen traveling 13 to 15 miles a day.

A NIGHT HERDER could graze several hundred cattle. One ox early became recognized by all the others as leader. The herder merely had to control the leader.

Where grass was plentiful the herd ate its fill in three hours, then lay down. At faint dawn the steers were started. When within earshot of the wagons, the herder shouted to his mates, “Roll Out”.

After a breakfast of fried potatoes, fat meat, flapjacks and black coffee, the wagonmaster commanded, “Yoke up”. If the steers were wild it might require two hours. Farther on, the bullwhacker needed only 15 minutes.

The lead pair were wheelers, the next yoke the off and near leader and the other eight swing cattle. If only the easiest steers to yoke were chosen it was a lazy, lagging outfit. Effort was made to get an even distribution of wild and docile in each hitch. The bullwhacker’s pledge of no profanity was hardest to keep.

TWO GENERATIONS OF TURLEYS of Saline County followed the trail from 1825 until the Civil War. Judge John D. Turley of Arrow Rock, at 85, told Walter Williams: “We fought Indian across the continent and traded profitably with the Mexicans. We bought whiskey from Missouri distilleries at 16 to 40 cents a gallon and sold it at \$3. After diluting it with equal parts of water, it still was terrible.

“An ordinary wagon load was 7,200 pounds. We opened a store at Taos or Santa Fe and sold out in two or three months. Father traded the remnants for Mexican sheep at \$1 a head and sold them in California at \$10. I sold sassafras root at \$4.50 a pond in Taos.

“On our last trip, made in 49 days, we met Rose, handsomest Indian woman in the West. In Mexico the fandango, a public dance, was the chief entertainment. Spanish girls at fandangos sometimes were treated to ice cream and whisky, a devilish combination.”

In 1828 a wagon train from Franklin enroute home was attacked by Comanches on the Arkansas river near the present Lamar, Colorado. A week’s running fight fatigued the sleepless Missourians.

When the Indians withdrew, the train stopped for a square meal and to rest the animals. Suddenly the savages reappeared, stampeded horses and mules and besieged the stranded train.

PREJUDICED against death from thirst, the Missourians deserted their wagons under cover of darkness, taking \$10,000 of their Santa Fe silver. Most of this they cached on an island in the Arkansas, then force marched to Pawnee Rock near the present Larned, Kansas.

Failing to contact a train there, they struggled on. At Cow Creek they divided, the stronger pushing toward Independence, Missouri, bent on relief for the desperate stragglers.

Autumn’s frost found them without blankets and their bare feet leaving bloody tracks. Existing 11 days on one turkey, one ‘coon and wild grapes, they reached a settlement. Half naked and near collapse they were taken to Independence.

A rescue party saved the others, by then reduced almost to skeletons.

RECOVERED, the adventurers outfitted another train and left Fort Leavenworth next May with the first military escort to Santa Fe. It was commanded by Major Bennett Riley, for whom Fort Riley was named.

The Missourians regained their buried treasure, sold their merchandise and arrived back at the Missouri river by late fall. Walter Williams got the story from Joseph H. Vernon, at Larned in 1911, during Dean Williams' trip over the route as president of the Old Trails Association.

IN THE WAKE of freighters, stage coaches came into use for passengers, mail and express. Bailey's Mansion House was the midway stop and central office for the stage line running from St. Louis to Independence. There was a line from Boonville to Jefferson City with a stage stop near Clarks Fork, recalled vividly by Mr. And Mrs. William Hurt, east of Boonville, as a bustling, exciting place.

The important stage line from Independence to Santa Fe was started, July 1, 1840.

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Resplendent in bright paint, the coaches were water-tight to ferry streams. They accommodated eight passengers. And eight guards were equipped to fire 136 shots without reloading.

Fresh horses, meals, lodging and drink were available at important stage stops. A blacksmith and men to cut prairie hay were sent from Independence to establish quarters at Council Grove, Kansas 150 miles from the Missouri terminus.

After gold was discovered in California news of the *Pony Express* from St. Joseph to San Francisco thrilled Cooper County. Forty riders covered nearly 2000 miles in eight days over plains and mountains – hostile country – while summer burned and winter howled.

LONG BEFORE the first Pony Express rider spurred his steed from the western terminus of the Hannibal and St. Joe Railroad on that initial dash, subscriptions were sought January 31, 1850, in St. Louis to build the Pacific railroad. It started the present Missouri Pacific.

Three St. Louisians joined in giving \$100,000.

Communities along the rival routes bid by voting bonds or raising purses. Boonville did not share in the enthusiasm. She was proud and jealous of her river trade. She was prosperous and busy. The road would come to her.

Four miles above Jefferson City the railroad left the river and climbed steeply to rolling prairies. It made Sedalia. Steamboating declined and Boonville languished.

A poor substitute for the main line was the Osage Valley or Versailles branch scrapped in 1936. In the early '70s the present Missouri-Kansas-Texas helped mightily. Early this century the Missouri Pacific built its water-level freight route through Boonville to Kansas City, along the originally planned course. But Boonville had faltered on the threshold of a new age.

Rails drew bands of steel about a nation newly torn by civil war. They broadened provincial views. They brought fast mail and encouraged the telegraph. Urban and rural communities were linked by the finest transportation system in the world and the frontier was pushed westward with renewed vigor.

SENATOR THOMAS HART BENTON at first opposed government aid to railroads. In 1849, he reversed himself and won his greatest renown.

Stephen A. Douglas, wanting the presidency, was expected to promote plans for the road west from Chicago, missing Missouri. Accepting a personally extended invitation by John F. Darby to attend the rail booster meeting in St. Louis, Benton said: "Douglas can never be president, sir. . . . His legs are too short, sir. . . . His coat, like a cow's tail, hangs too near the ground, sir."

In his St. Louis speech, Benton extended his right arm to indicate the course, tilted his chin and intoned: "Let us beseech the national legislature to build the great road upon the great national line which unites Europe and Asia – the line which will find on our continent the bay of San Francisco at one end, St. Louis in the middle, the national

metropolis and the great commercial emporium at the other end – the line which will be adorned with great Columbus, whose design it accomplishes, hewn from the granite mass of a peak of the Rocky Mountains overlooking the road – the pedestal and statue a part of the mountain, pointing with outstretched arm to the western horizon and saying to the flying passenger, ‘There is the East – there is India’”

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