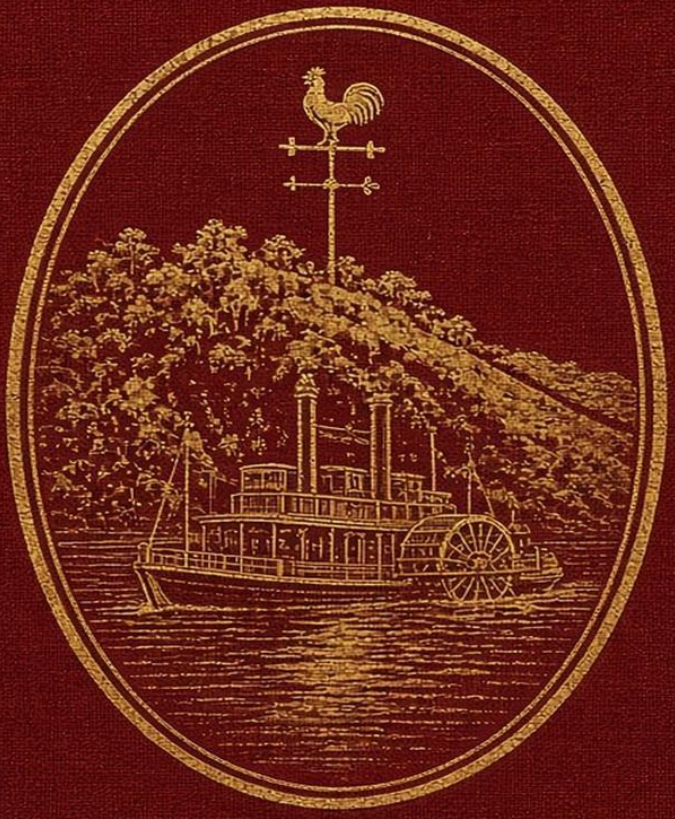
THE BOY FROM TUSCUMBIA LANDING



A Novel of the Osage River

TUSCUMBIA · MISSOURI · 1878–1900

Illustrated

The Boy from Tuscumbia Landing

A Novel of the Osage River Country



With Twelve Painted Illustrations
and Historical Photographs of the River and the Town

TUSCUMBIA, MISSOURI
MDCCCLXXVIII - MCM

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All characters in this story are fictional.
The river, the town and its history are real.

From the Archives



Tuscumbia and the winding Osage River on the U.S. Geological Survey's "Tuscumbia" map sheet (scale 1:125,000), dated 1886, the very years of this story.

U.S. Geological Survey, 1886. Public domain. Via the University of Texas Libraries PCL Map Collection and Wikimedia Commons.

Chapter the First

Old Brass Calls the Morning



There was a rooster in Tuscumbia, Missouri, who believed the sun would not come up unless he told it to.

His name was Old Brass. He was red as a brick and gold around the neck, and he had one crooked toe from a fight with a possum he had won, or at least had not lost. Every morning, a good while before light, Old Brass climbed the split-rail fence behind the Postock house, puffed himself up like a preacher about to start a long sermon, and let the whole Osage River valley know that morning was coming whether it liked it or not.

Jeremy Postock liked it. He was eight years old in the spring of 1881, and he loved that rooster more than he loved most people.

Jeremy pulled on his overalls. The knees were patched with two different colors of flour sack, so that one knee said PRIDE OF ST. LOUIS and the other just said ...OUIS. His shirt had been his cousin's, and before that it had belonged to a cousin of his cousin. His shoes came out of a barrel of secondhand shoes, and the left one was a size bigger than the right, so he stuffed the toe with wool.

Down in the kitchen, Ma was already at the stove. Hattie Postock cooked bacon and eggs every single morning of the world, from their own pigs and their own chickens, and she did it the way some people pray, quiet and steady and sure.

"Wash your face," she said, without turning around.

"I washed it yesterday."

"Then it's had a whole day to get dirty again."

The bacon crackled. The eggs had yellow middles like little suns.

Here is the strange thing about the Postocks: Pa owned the general store, and they were poor anyhow.

Walter Postock's shelves were full of coffee and calico and nails and lamp oil. But half the farmers in Miller County bought on credit and paid when the corn came in,

and some years the corn didn't come in much. So the shelves were full, and the Postock cupboard was mostly bacon and eggs and cornbread, and the money lived in a ledger book instead of in anybody's pocket.

"Credit is a kindness," Pa liked to say. "Kindness is slow pay. But it pays."

Jeremy carried his lunch to school in a lard bucket with a lid. Inside was cornbread, a cold boiled egg, and sometimes, if the hens had been generous, a second boiled egg. He walked to school, like everybody, on a rutted wagon track that turned to soup in the rain.

Tuscumbia sat on a massive hill above the Osage, and from the top you could see the whole town stacked like a set of steps. The Baptist church sat below. The little bank faced the street across from it. And at the very top of the hill, great and majestic, stood the brick courthouse, two stories tall, built in 1857 and 1858, and painted red because, Aunt Lu said, the bricks had come out a little ugly and paint is cheaper than pride.

From the boat landing at the river's edge, a long flight of stone steps climbed all the way up to that courthouse. There were about three hundred of them. Jeremy had counted them so many times that he knew which ones wobbled and which ones were worn into little bowls by fifty years of boots. To the right of the steps the woods came right down the hill, oak and cedar and redbud, and

here and there a house sat tucked into the slope on the way up, its chimney smoking, its chickens wandering out onto the steps as if they owned them.

Aunt Lu was Pa's sister, Lucinda Postock. She worked in the courthouse copying the tax rolls in a fine slanting hand, and her desk sat beside a tall window that looked straight down the bluff at the river.

"Best view in Miller County," she told Jeremy, "and I get paid to sit next to it."

From Jeremy's Diary
April 9, 1881

Aunt Lu gave me this book for my birthday. She says a man who writes down his days lives them twice. I am not a man yet but I am 8. Old Brass crowed 11 times this morning. I counted. Ma says that is showing off.

That evening the whole town walked down to the landing, because something new was coming up the river.

It was the mail boat. Some men in Jefferson City had built a little steamer just to carry the mail, and they had named her the *Tuscumbia*, after this very town. She was ninety feet long with only one deck, and her schedule said she would leave Jefferson City at six in the morning and tie up at Tuscumbia at six at night, about seventy-five miles by the winding river.

At ten minutes to six, Jeremy heard her whistle come floating around the bend.

He would remember that sound his whole life. It was the sound of the world remembering that Tuscumbia was there.

The river boat was the great big deal in Tuscumbia, the biggest deal there was. When she tied up, the whole hill came alive. The mail sacks came off first, slung over a man's shoulder, and went up the three hundred stone steps toward the post office and the courthouse. Then came the passengers, ladies holding their skirts, drummers with sample cases, a farmer with a crate of hens, all of them climbing, stopping, puffing, and climbing again, while the children ran up and down past them like squirrels.

Jeremy ran the steps two at a time, all the way to the top, and stood gasping beside the courthouse door, looking down at the little boat glowing in the dusk.

"Three hundred," he panted to Aunt Lu, who was locking up. "I beat the mail."

"The mail," said Aunt Lu, "is not racing you."

From Jeremy's Diary
April 9, 1881, later

The mail boat has OUR NAME on it. Richie says that means we own it. Pa says it does not. Richie and I are going to pretend anyway.

From the Archives



The old Miller County courthouse on the hill at Tuscumbia, photographed in June 2026. Its center block is the two-story brick courthouse of 1857–59; in 1910–13 the county faced it with native limestone and added wings.
Photograph by TCP04, CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia Commons. Building history: University of Missouri Extension, "Missouri Courthouses: Miller County."



Log cabins preserved on the grounds of the Miller County Museum in Tuscumbia, photographed in June 2026.
Photograph by TCP04, CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Chapter the Second

A Girl, a Pie, and a Sunbonnet



Every summer, when the blackberries along the river bluffs went black and fat and full of juice, Tuscumbia held its blackberry pie festival.

Nobody could remember who started it, and nobody ever wanted it to stop. They set long plank tables under the shade trees, and every woman in the county brought her best pie and pretended it wasn't her best.

Jeremy's very first memory came from that festival, in the summer of 1878, when he was five.

He had eaten one slice of pie, and then another slice, and then, because nobody was watching, the middle out of

a third slice with his fingers. His face was purple from his ears to his chin. He looked like a boy who had lost a fight with a grape.

A little girl in a yellow calico dress and a sunbonnet bigger than her whole head stood in front of him and stared.

"You're all blue," she said.

"I'm purple," said Jeremy, who was particular.

"You're blue AND purple." She held out her own slice of pie, carefully, with both hands. "Here. You can have mine. You're already ruined."

Her name was Clara Whitlow. Her family had come up the river that spring, and her father worked at the sawmill. She had freckles in a pattern Jeremy later decided looked exactly like the Big Dipper, and a laugh that went up at the end like a question.

He ate her pie. She watched him do it. Then she said, "You have to be my friend now. That's the rule."

There was no such rule. But Jeremy followed it for the rest of his life.

From then on, Clara Whitlow was simply part of things, the way the river was part of things.

She was at school, three desks over, getting the spelling words right while Jeremy got them interesting. She was at church, two pews back, kicking the bench in time to the

hymns. She was at the landing on mail-boat evenings, standing on a crate so she could see over the men's hats.

She was better at skipping stones than Jeremy and Richie put together. "It's in the wrist," she would say, sending a flat rock dancing seven times across the Osage.

From Jeremy's Diary
July 16, 1881

Blackberry festival. I ate 4 pieces. Clara ate 3 and won the pie-eating race for girls. She gave me her ribbon to hold and then forgot to take it back. I am keeping it in this book for safe.

Every summer the festival came back. Every summer Jeremy and Clara stood at the same long table under the same big oak, a little taller than the year before, and every summer she held out a slice of pie with both hands and said, "You're already ruined," and every summer they both laughed until Mrs. Kettering told them to hush, there were Baptists present.

Ma watched them once from across the yard and said something to Aunt Lu that Jeremy wasn't meant to hear.

"Those two," Ma said, "are going to break each other's hearts someday."

"Or mend them," said Aunt Lu.

Jeremy didn't know what either one meant. He went back for another piece of pie.

Chapter the Third

Richie Mellis and the Velocipede



If Clara was the river, Richie Mellis was the flood.

He and Jeremy had been friends since the first morning of school, when Richie, aged five, walked up to Jeremy, aged five, and announced, "I can hold my breath for a whole minute," and then turned so red trying to prove it that the teacher had to pat him on the back.

Richie had hair the color of straw and a gap in his teeth he could whistle through. His folks farmed a stony patch up Saline Creek, and they were poorer even than the Postocks, which Jeremy hadn't known was possible.

Richie's shoes had no shoelaces, only twine. His coat had been his grandmother's. He did not care one bit.

"Clothes are just for keeping the wind off," Richie said. "The wind don't care what they look like."

Together the two of them owned the woods.

They hunted arrowheads in the plowed fields after a rain, when the water washed the dirt off the flint and the points came up shining like they'd been waiting. Pa said the Osage people had lived along this river long before any town was here, and that every arrowhead was a piece of somebody's work and ought to be treated with respect. So the boys kept them in a cigar box and never sold a single one.

They built a treehouse in the big white oak above the Postock pasture, out of scrap boards from the sawmill and nails they straightened themselves with a rock. It leaned. It creaked. When the wind blew, the whole thing swayed like a boat.

"It's supposed to do that," said Richie. "It's a ship of the air."

They cut firewood every fall until their hands blistered, and stacked it in long rows against the house, because a Missouri winter does not care how tired you are. They hunted rabbits and squirrels with slingshots carved from forked hickory, and Richie could knock a walnut off a fence post at twenty paces.

The velocipede was Richie's idea. Most of the bad ideas were.

He had seen a picture in a newspaper of a man in a city riding a tall wheeled machine called a bicycle, with a front wheel as big as a man and a back wheel as small as a pie. Nobody in Tuscumbia owned one. Nobody in Tuscumbia had ever seen one.

"We'll make one," Richie said.

"Out of what?"

Richie pointed to the old broken buggy behind the Kettering barn.

It took them most of the summer of 1883. They took two buggy wheels that didn't match, a plank for a seat, a hickory pole for steering, and a great deal of baling wire. There were no pedals, so you sat on the plank and pushed with your feet, and when you went downhill you lifted your feet and prayed.

They named it the *Thunder Mule*.

On its first ride, Richie went down the hill behind the Baptist church faster than any boy had ever gone anywhere. The *Thunder Mule* hit a root. Richie went one direction. The wheels went another. The plank went a third.

He landed in Mrs. Kettering's rhubarb.

There was a long silence. Then Richie's head came up out of the rhubarb with a leaf stuck to his ear, and he said,

perfectly calm, "I believe I'll walk home."

Jeremy laughed so hard he had to lie down in the road.

From Jeremy's Diary
August 2, 1883

The Thunder Mule is broken. Richie is not, only bruised. Mrs. Kettering says we owe her a rhubarb pie. Ma is making it. I am not allowed near the hill behind the church until I am "old enough to know better," which Pa says may be never.

They fixed the *Thunder Mule*. It broke again. They fixed it again. By the end of summer it had more baling wire than wood. But they rode it, and when they couldn't ride it, they pushed it, and when they couldn't push it, they sat in the grass beside it and talked about the places they'd go someday.

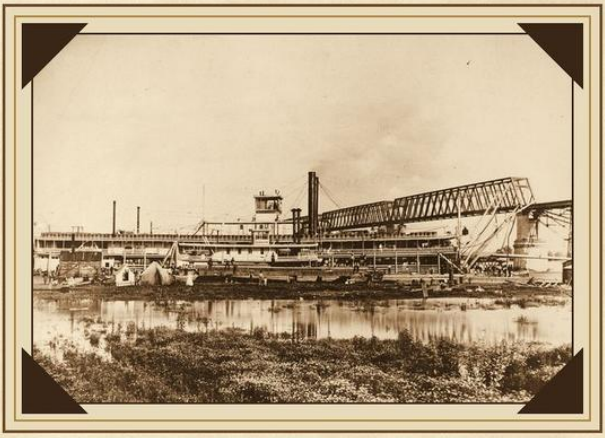
"St. Louis," said Richie.

"Farther," said Jeremy.

"There ain't anything farther than St. Louis."

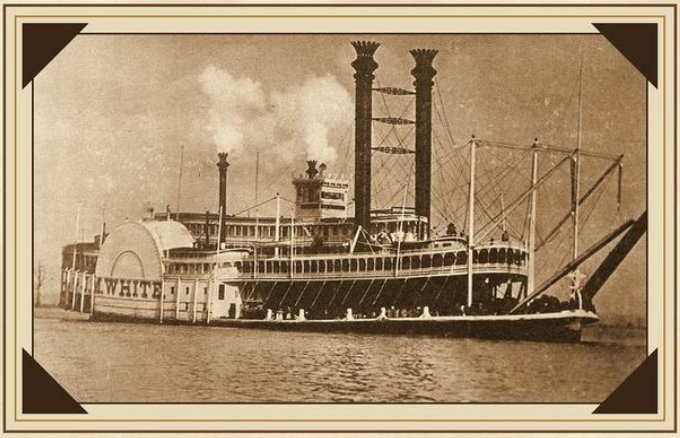
"Then I'll go see what's past it."

From the Archives



The steamboats Montana (built 1879) and Penguin (built 1877) held below the St. Charles bridge on the Missouri River by high water, about 1880. The Osage empties into the Missouri below Jefferson City.

UW–La Crosse Historic Steamboat Photographs, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. Public domain. Via Wikimedia Commons.



The sidewheel steamer J. M. White (1878–1886) under way. She was a Mississippi River boat, not an Osage boat; she is shown here as one of the grand river packets of Jeremy's boyhood years.

Missouri Historical Society, via the Digital Public Library of America and Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

Chapter the Fourth

Bath Night at the River



There were no wells in their part of Tuscumbia, not in those days, not for the Postocks. Water came from the spring and the creek and the river, and it came in buckets, carried up the hill one sloshing step at a time. Drinking water came from the spring. Wash water came from the creek. And baths, in summer, came from the Osage River itself.

Saturday evening was bath night. Ma marched Jeremy down to the gravel bar below the bluff with a bar of homemade lye soap and two towels she had sewn out of flour sacks. The towels were rough as a cat's tongue and

stamped with faded blue letters, so that when you dried your face, you came away with a little bit of FINEST FAMILY FLOUR printed on your cheek.

"In you go," said Ma, sitting on a rock with her lantern.

"It's cold."

"It's July."

"It's July cold."

Richie came too, because Richie's family had no gravel bar and no lantern and, his mother said, no hope of getting him clean without help. The two boys waded in to their waists and scrubbed and splashed and dunked each other and generally made such a racket that the frogs along the bank stopped singing out of pure disgust.

All but one.

He was the biggest bullfrog in Missouri. Jeremy was sure of it. He sat on a sunken log not three feet from Richie, fat and green and gold-eyed, with a throat that swelled like a bellows.

"Don't move," whispered Jeremy.

"Why?"

"There's a frog lookin' at you."

"How big a frog?"

The frog answered for himself. He let out a croak so deep it sounded like a cow falling down a well, and then he jumped, straight at Richie's face.

Richie screamed. Not a boy's scream, either. It was a high, thin, surprising scream, like a teakettle. He fell over backward into the river. The frog landed on top of his head, sat there a moment as if considering a new home, then hopped off and paddled away, very dignified.

Ma laughed so hard she dropped the soap.

Richie came up spitting river water. "That frog," he said, "had *intentions*."

For the rest of that summer, every time Richie took a bath, he took a stick with him.

From Jeremy's Diary
July 22, 1882

Richie got attacked by a frog. Ma laughed until she cried. She says it is the best thing that has happened in Tuscumbia since the mail boat. Richie says if anybody tells, he will hold his breath until he dies. I am only telling this book.

Winter was different. Winter was no laughing matter.

When the cold came down out of the north, the Osage froze along its edges and the wind hissed through the cracks in the Postock walls. Ma stuffed the cracks with rags. Pa banked the stove at night. Jeremy slept in his clothes under three quilts with a hot brick wrapped in flannel at his feet, and some mornings there was frost on the inside of the window and a skin of ice on the water

bucket.

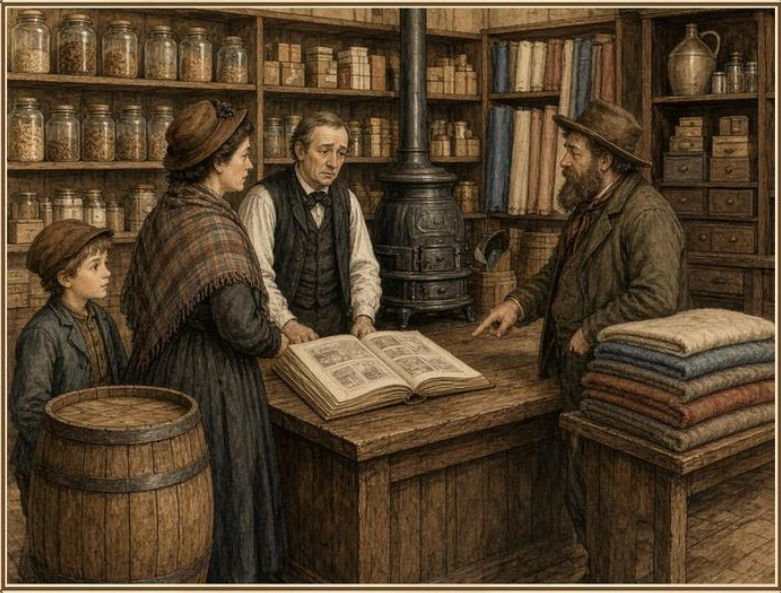
Baths in winter happened in a washtub by the stove, once a week if you were lucky, and the youngest went last, in the grayest water. Jeremy was the only child, so he went first, which he considered the one great advantage of having no brothers.

On winter nights, nobody traveled. There were no roads, only trails and wagon tracks over the hills, and in a hard freeze a man could get lost between his barn and his house. Sometimes a covered wagon creaked through town in the fall, a family heading west, the children's faces peeking out from under the canvas, and Jeremy would watch it go and wonder where those children would be sleeping when the snow came.

"Lord keep them," Ma always said, watching too.

Chapter the Fifth

The Wish Book



Every farmhouse in Miller County had two books worth reading: the Bible and the Montgomery Ward catalog.

Mr. Aaron Montgomery Ward had started his business up in Chicago in 1872, selling goods by mail to farm families who lived too far from a city to shop in one. By the time Jeremy was ten, the catalog was as thick as a family Bible and twice as well-thumbed. People called it the Wish Book. It had stoves and plows and harmonicas and corsets and a pocketknife with six blades that Jeremy had looked at so many times the page had gone soft as

cloth.

You didn't get anything from the Wish Book quickly. You wrote your order on the form, Pa added it to the store's order, and it went down the river with the mail. Then the goods came back by railroad to Jefferson City and by steamboat up the Osage, and the boxes were carried up from the landing, step by stone step, all three hundred of them, to Postock's store.

That took four weeks if everything went right. Six weeks if it didn't. Things in Miller County often didn't.

In the fall of 1883, Ma ordered a new teakettle.

The old one had a hole in the bottom that she had patched twice with a rag and once with prayer. The new one in the catalog was blue enamel with white speckles, and Ma looked at that picture the way Jeremy looked at the six-bladed knife.

After two weeks, Ma walked down to the store.

"Walter, has my kettle come?"

"Not yet, Hattie. The river's low."

After three weeks, Ma walked down to the store again.

"Walter, has my kettle come?"

"Not yet, dear. There was fog at Jefferson City."

After four weeks, she went again.

"Walter."

"The railroad," said Pa, very seriously, "has been experiencing difficulties."

"What difficulties?"

Pa thought about it. "Railroad difficulties."

It was the only time Jeremy ever saw his mother put her hands on her hips at his father. Pa saw it too, and he went a little pale, the way a man does when he realizes that owning the store does not make him the boss of it.

"Hattie," he said, "I promise you on my honor, that kettle is coming. And when it does, I will carry it up the hill myself, and I will make the coffee in it, and I will wash it after."

Ma narrowed her eyes. "You'll wash it?"

"Twice."

The kettle came in the fifth week, packed in straw. Pa met the boat at the landing and carried it up the long stone steps himself, past the houses tucked in the woods, held high like a trophy, and the whole street came out to see what Walter Postock was so proud of. He made the coffee. He washed the kettle. Twice.

Ma kept that kettle for thirty years.

From Jeremy's Diary

October 30, 1883

Ma's kettle came. Pa washed it two times like he promised. Ma says a promise is only as good as the

From Jeremy's Diary (continued)
October 30, 1883

man who carries it up the hill. I think that means Pa is a good man. I already knew that.

It was not always so funny.

That same fall, a farmer named Silas Pruitt came stomping into the store with frost in his beard. He was a big man, broad as a door, with a voice that rattled the lamp chimneys.

"Postock," he said. "Six weeks ago I ordered four wool blankets from that Chicago book. My wife's been sleeping in her coat. My little ones are sleeping three to a bed to keep warm. Winter's coming down the river right behind me. Where are my blankets?"

Pa checked the ledger. He checked the shelves. He checked the back room. Then he came back slowly and stood behind the counter and looked Mr. Pruitt in the eye.

"Silas," he said, "I don't know. The order went. The money went. The blankets haven't come. I won't lie to you and say they're coming Tuesday, because I don't know that they are."

Jeremy, hiding behind the cracker barrel, held his breath. He thought Mr. Pruitt might pick up the whole counter and throw it in the river.

Instead, Pa said, "Wait here."

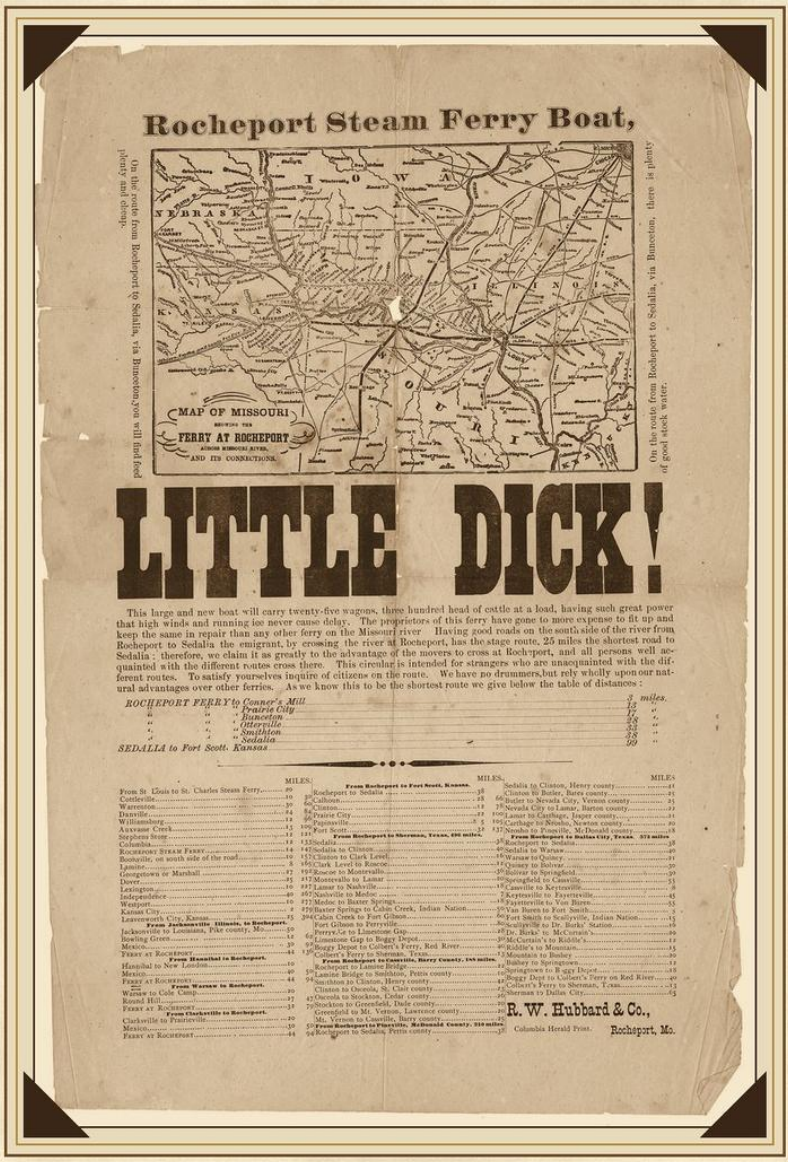
He walked out the back door and up the hill to the house, and when he came back he was carrying four blankets in his arms. Jeremy knew those blankets. One was from Ma's own bed. One was the striped one off his.

"These are used," Pa said. "They're clean. They're warm. Take them home tonight. When your new ones come, we'll swap back, and if they never come, you keep these and I'll take it up with Chicago."

Mr. Pruitt stood there a long moment. Then the big man's eyes went shiny, and he cleared his throat very loudly, the way men do when they would rather die than cry in a store.

"Walter," he said, "I'll not forget it."

From the Archives



Rocheport Steam Ferry Boat,

On the route from Rocheport to Sedalia, via Bunceton, you will find feed plenty and cheap.

On the route from Rocheport to Sedalia, via Bunceton, there is plenty of good stock water.

LITTLE DICK!

This large and new boat will carry twenty-five wagons, three hundred head of cattle at a load, having such great power that high winds and running ice never cause delay. The proprietors of this ferry have gone to more expense to fit up and keep the same in repair than any other ferry on the Missouri river. Having good roads on the south side of the river from Rocheport to Sedalia the emigrant, by crossing the river at Rocheport, has the stage route, 25 miles the shortest road to Sedalia; therefore, we claim it as greatly to the advantage of the movers to cross at Rocheport, and all persons well acquainted with the different routes cross there. This circular is intended for strangers who are unacquainted with the different routes. To satisfy yourselves inquire of citizens on the route. We have no drummers, but rely wholly upon our natural advantages over other ferries. As we know this to be the shortest route we give below the table of distances:

			miles.
ROCHEPORT FERRY to	Conner's Mill		13
"	"	Prairie City	17
"	"	Bunceton	25
"	"	Otterville	33
"	"	Smithton	38
"	"	Sedalia	99

SEDALIA to Fort Scott, Kansas

	MILES.
From St Louis to St. Charles Steam Ferry	20
Cuttleville	10
Warrenton	30
Danville	24
Williamsburg	12
Auxvase Creek	15
Stephens Store	12
Columbia	12
Rocheport Steam Ferry	14
Booneville, on south side of the road	10
Lamine	8
Georgetown or Marshall	17
Dover	25
Lexington	10
Independence	40
Westport	10
Kansas City	7
Leavenworth City, Kansas	75
From Jacksonville, Illinois, to Rocheport.	
Jacksonville to Louisiana, Pike county, Mo	50
Bowling Green	15
Mexico	30
Ferry at Rocheport	44
From Hannibal to Rocheport.	
Hannibal to New London	10
Mexico	40
Ferry at Rocheport	44
From Warsaw to Rocheport.	
Warsaw to Cole Camp	20
Round Hill	17
Ferry at Rocheport	37
From Clarksville to Rocheport.	
Clarksville to Prairieville	20
Mexico	30
Ferry at Rocheport	44

	MILES.
From Rocheport to Fort Scott, Kansas.	
Rocheport to Sedalia	38
Calhoun	18
Clinton	12
Prairie City	12
Papinsville	5
Fort Scott	12
From Rocheport to Sherman, Texas, 490 miles.	
Sedalia	38
Sedalia to Clinton	40
Clinton to Clark Level	16
Clark Level to Knoche	12
Knoche to Montevallo	12
Montevallo to Lamar	12
Lamar to Nashville	12
Nashville to Medoc	12
Medoc to Baxter Springs	12
Baxter Springs to Cabin Creek, Indian Nation	30
Cabin Creek to Fort Gibson	30
Fort Gibson to Perryville	30
Perryv.le to Limestone Gap	18
Limestone Gap to Boggy Depot	30
Boggy Depot to Colbert's Ferry, Red River	40
Colbert's Ferry to Sherman, Texas	12
From Rocheport to Caseville, Barry County, 185 miles.	
Rocheport to Lamine Bridge	12
Lamine Bridge to Smithton, Pettis county	18
Smithton to Clinton, Henry county	18
Clinton to Osceola, St. Clair county	25
Osceola to Stockton, Cedar county	20
Stockton to Greenfield, Dade county	20
Greenfield to Mt. Vernon, Lawrence county	20
Mt. Vernon to Cassville, Barry county	25
From Rocheport to Pineville, McDonald County, 310 miles.	
Rocheport to Sedalia, Pettis county	37

	MILES.
Sedalia to Clinton, Henry county	41
Clinton to Butler, Bates county	25
Butler to Nevada City, Vernon county	25
Nevada City to Lamar, Barton county	12
Lamar to Carthage, Jasper county	21
Carthage to Neosho, Newton county	20
Neosho to Pineville, McDonald county	18
From Rocheport to Dallas City, Texas. 372 miles	
Rocheport to Sedalia	38
Sedalia to Warsaw	40
Warsaw to Quincy	21
Quincy to Bolivar	20
Bolivar to Springfield	50
Springfield to Caseville	53
Caseville to Kerrsville	8
Kerrsville to Fayetteville	45
Fayetteville to Van Buren	55
Van Buren to Fort Smith	5
Fort Smith to Scullyville, Indian Nation	15
Scullyville to Dr. Burks' Station	16
Dr. Burks' to McCurtain's	20
McCurtain's to Riddle's	12
Riddle's to Mountain	15
Mountain to Bushey	20
Bushey to Springtown	12
Springtown to Boggy Depot	18
Boggy Dept to Colbert's Ferry on Red River	40
Colbert's Ferry to Sherman, Texas	12
Sherman to Dallas City	63

R. W. Hubbard & Co.,

Columbia Herald Print. Rocheport, Mo.

Handbill for the steam ferryboat Little Dick, which crossed the Missouri River from Rocheport, Missouri, about 1876, with a map of its route.

Printed by the Columbia Herald. Missouri Historical Society, via the Digital Public Library of America and Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

Chapter the Sixth

Fiddle, Cocoa, and the Good Book



Mr. Pruitt's blankets came three weeks later, the day before the first real snow. The very next Saturday, the Pruitts came to supper.

They came in a wagon through the snow, Mr. Pruitt and Mrs. Pruitt and four little Pruitts bundled up like sacks of meal. They brought the swapped-back blankets folded neat and a ham as big as a church bell.

Ma had cooked all day. There was the ham, and fried chicken, and cornbread, and green beans put up in summer, and sweet potatoes, and a dried-apple stack cake seven layers high. And because it was a special night, Ma

had bought a tin of cocoa from Pa's own shelves, and she made hot chocolate in a big pot, with milk from the cow and sugar and a pinch of salt.

Jeremy had never tasted anything like it. It was like drinking a warm blanket.

After supper, Pa took down his fiddle.

Walter Postock was not a great fiddler, but he was a happy one, and in a cold house in a long winter that is better. He played "Soldier's Joy" and "Turkey in the Straw" and "Arkansas Traveler," tapping his foot so hard the dishes jumped. Mr. Pruitt grabbed Mrs. Pruitt's hand and swung her around the kitchen. Aunt Lu, who had walked up from town, danced with Ma. The little Pruitts danced with each other and fell down and danced again.

And Jeremy, who was ten years old and too shy to ask anybody, ended up dancing with the smallest Pruitt girl, who was four and stood on his shoes the whole time.

"You're a good dancer," she told him solemnly.

"I'm not doing anything," said Jeremy. "You're doing it."

When the fiddle was put away and the fire had burned low, Pa took the family Bible down from the shelf.

It was old and heavy, with a cracked leather cover and the births and deaths of four generations of Postocks written inside the front in four different hands. Pa opened

it on the table in the lamplight, and the room went quiet, even the little Pruitts.

He read from the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew:

"For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me."

Mr. Pruitt looked down at the folded blankets on the bench beside him and did not look up for a while.

Outside, the snow kept falling. It fell on the courthouse and the church and the little bank, and on the river, where it vanished into the dark water without a sound.

From Jeremy's Diary
December 8, 1883

The Pruitts came. Hot chocolate is the best thing in the world. Second best is Pa's fiddle. Third best is that nobody is cold tonight. Pa read about clothing the naked. Mr. Pruitt cried a little but said it was the onions. There were no onions.

The winters were long, and the roads were bad, and getting anywhere at all was a labor.

When Jeremy was small, there was hardly a road in the county, only trails that followed the ridges and dropped down into the creek bottoms, where wagons sank to the axles. In the 1880s the men of the county began working on the roads a little at a time, with shovels and picks and

mule teams, filling the worst mudholes with rock and cutting the steepest grades down to something a horse could climb.

It was slow. Pa said it was like trying to empty the Osage with a teaspoon. But each fall the wagon tracks were a little better than the fall before, and each year it took a little less time to get to Pruitt's place, or to Richie's, or to the mill.

"Someday," Pa said, "a man will ride from here to Jefferson City in a single day and not even get his boots muddy."

"That's crazy," said Richie, who was over for supper, as Richie often was.

"So was a mail boat named Tuscumbia," said Pa.

Chapter the Seventh

Captain Thorncroft's Dollar



Every child in Tuscumbia knew that the best candy in Missouri was kept in a glass jar on the desk of Captain Elias Thorncroft.

The Captain was old, as old as anybody Jeremy knew. He had run a ferry across the Osage for twenty years, poling and later steaming folks and wagons and mules and once, he swore, a bear, from one bank to the other. He had saved every penny the ferry earned. And when he was too stiff to work the river, he took those pennies and opened the bank across the street from the Baptist church.

It was a small bank. It was a frame building with one room, one desk, one iron safe, and one big glass jar of candy. There were striped peppermint sticks and horehound drops and lemon balls the size of marbles, and the Captain said a bank without candy was like a river without fish: technically possible, but sad.

On Saturday mornings in summer, Captain Thorncroft hired children.

He paid one dollar. One whole dollar, which was more money than Jeremy usually saw in a month, for a day's work painting the bank's picket fence, or weeding the flower beds, or hauling gravel for the path, or planting the rose bushes he ordered from the Wish Book. Every child who worked got the dollar, and every child got candy at noon, and every child was expected to do the job right.

So the children of Tuscumbia got up early. Earlier than early. Earlier, some mornings, than Old Brass.

By the time the Captain shuffled up the street with his key at seven, there would be a row of children sitting on the bank's stone steps like birds on a wire. They had bare feet and patched elbows and their hair was combed with water.

"Well, well," the Captain would say. "Is this a bank or a henhouse?"

"A bank, Captain!"

"And what do we do at a bank?"

"WORK HARD AND DON'T STEAL!"

"That's right," the Captain said, and he unlocked the door.

The summer Jeremy was twelve, he painted the whole north side of the picket fence by himself. When he was done, the Captain came out, looked it over, and nodded. Then he counted the coins into Jeremy's hand and went back inside.

Jeremy started home. Halfway down the steps, he looked at his hand and stopped.

The Captain had given him two dollars.

He stood there a long time. Two dollars. That was a new knife. That was the six-bladed knife from the Wish Book with money left over. Nobody would know. The Captain was old. The Captain probably couldn't count anymore.

Jeremy turned around and walked back up the steps.

"Captain," he said. "You gave me two."

The old man looked at the coins. Then he looked at Jeremy for a long, long moment over the top of his spectacles.

"I did," said the Captain. "On purpose. I give every child two dollars, once. Most of them keep it. You are the fourth child in twenty years to bring it back." He took one dollar, then pressed the other into Jeremy's palm and closed his fingers over it. "Now you've earned one dollar

for the fence, and one for being the kind of man I'd lend money to someday. Go on."

From Jeremy's Diary
June 23, 1885

The Captain tested me and I passed but I almost did not pass. I want to write that down so I remember that I almost did not. Pa says honesty is not when it is easy. It is when nobody would ever know.

Pa was quiet when Jeremy told him. Then he took his son out on the porch and they watched the river for a while.

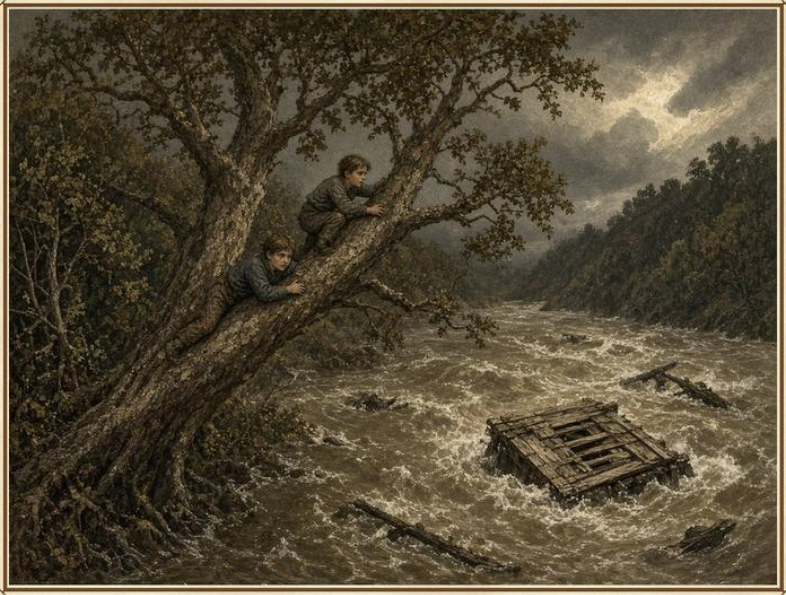
"Jeremy," said Pa finally, "we don't have much. You know that. Your shoes don't match and your shirt's been on three other boys. But we have our name. Nobody can take that off a shelf. Only we can sell it, and only for nothing."

He put his hand on Jeremy's shoulder.

"Don't ever sell it."

Chapter the Eighth

The Four-Mile Ride



The Osage River flooded about twice a year, as regular as Christmas and much less welcome.

In spring the rains came, and the water rose brown and fast and full of whole trees, and climbed into the low fields. Then everyone moved their chickens uphill, and Pa moved the flour and sugar to the top shelves, and the Baptist ladies prayed in shifts.

The boys were absolutely, positively forbidden to go near the river in flood.

So naturally, in April of 1884, they built a raft.

It was the best raft they had ever made. Richie said so, and Jeremy agreed. It was six cedar logs lashed with rope and wire, a plank deck, and two poles cut from saplings. They named it the *Golden Glory*, because they had heard that the grandest steamboats had grand names. They only meant to float it in the backwater of the creek, where the flood had made a quiet pond over the pasture.

They did not mean for the creek to break through the fence line, or for the current to carry the *Golden Glory*, with both of them aboard, into the main channel of the flooded Osage River.

But it did.

The river grabbed them like a hand.

One second they were laughing. The next, the raft was spinning, and the bank was gone, and the town was gone, and the bluffs were sliding past faster than any horse could run. Brown water slopped over the planks. A whole uprooted tree rolled past them like a sleeping giant turning over in bed.

"POLE!" Richie yelled. "POLE!"

Jeremy jammed his pole down. It never touched bottom.

They went one mile. Then two. Jeremy could see farms going by, and cows standing in water up to their bellies, and once a hen house floating along with three hens sitting

on the roof looking extremely annoyed. Three miles. The raft groaned. One of the lashings snapped, and a log began to work loose.

"Jeremy," said Richie, and his voice was very small. "I can't swim this."

"Nobody can swim this."

And then, out of the gray ahead, they saw the sycamore.

It was a huge old tree that had grown on a gravel island in the middle of the river, and over the years the current had pushed it so it leaned far out over the water, its white branches spreading like arms. The river was carrying them right under it.

"When I say jump," said Jeremy, "you jump and you grab and you don't let go of anything, not ever, not for nobody."

"Not for nobody," Richie whispered.

"JUMP!"

They jumped. Jeremy's hands hit bark, slipped, caught. He felt Richie's fingers hook into his collar. For one terrible second they both hung over the brown water. Then they climbed, hand over hand, up the leaning trunk, until they were sitting in the crook of the great white tree with their arms wrapped around it.

Below them, the *Golden Glory* came apart in six pieces and went away down the river.

They had come four miles.

From Jeremy's Diary
April 19, 1884

We almost died today. I will not write the whole thing because my hand is still shaking. I will only write that a sycamore tree saved our lives and I am going to thank it every year as long as I live.

They sat in that tree for three hours, soaked and shaking, while the water slowly began to fall. Just before dark, a wagon came down the bluff road on the far side, and a voice called out over the water:

"Is that the Postock boy? And is that the Mellis boy? Lord have mercy, what are you doing in my tree?"

It was Mr. Amos Kettering, whose rhubarb Richie had once landed in.

When the water dropped, he waded his mules out and fetched them down. He wrapped them in feed sacks and drove them home. The four-mile wagon ride took two hours over the muddy track, and Mr. Kettering did not say a single cross word the whole way. He only hummed hymns, and once in a while reached back and patted their heads as if to make sure they were real.

They were so filthy with river mud that Ma would not let them in the house. She marched them straight to the creek, where a little waterfall came down over the rocks, and stood them under it like two muddy pups. They

hollered at the cold, then laughed, then cried, then laughed again, and Ma scrubbed their heads with lye soap and cried right along with them.

"I ought to whip you both," she said, holding them so tight they couldn't breathe. "I ought to whip you both from here to Linn Creek."

She didn't. Not that night.

That spring was hard. The flood had taken a good part of the Mellis family's corn, and food was scarce. So one morning in May, Jeremy and Richie walked back down the river to look at the sycamore that had saved them.

On the bluff above the island, in a deep hollow where a spring ran down through the cedars, they found tracks. Dozens of them. Sharp, split, heart-shaped prints in the mud.

Deer.

The hollow was full of them, and nobody else knew it was there.

That fall, Pa and Mr. Mellis hunted the hollow, and the Mellis family ate venison all winter long. Richie's mother cried when the first deer was hung in their shed.

"That flood near took my boy," she said, "and then it gave us supper."

Richie said that was just like the river. It never gave you anything for free, but it always paid you back.

Chapter the Ninth

What the River Remembers



There was an old log cabin in the woods past the Mellis place that nobody lived in.

Its roof sagged. Its chimney had lost half its stones. Wildflowers grew in the doorway where feet had once worn the ground smooth. Jeremy and Richie and Clara found it one evening in the fall of 1884 while hunting for hickory nuts, and Clara, who was braver than both boys, went right up and looked inside.

"Somebody lived here a long time," she said. "Look how the floor's worn."

When Jeremy asked Aunt Lu about it, she was quiet for a while. Then she said, "Come up to the courthouse Saturday. There's something you ought to see."

On Saturday, Aunt Lu led him up the long stone steps from the landing, all three hundred of them, past the houses in the woods, and into the brick courthouse and back to a room that smelled of dust and ink. She took down a heavy old book with a cracked spine, an assessment book from before the war, and opened it on the table by the river-view window.

There were columns of names and numbers. Land, so many acres. Horses, so many. Cattle, so many. And then, in the same neat handwriting, in the same columns as the horses and the cattle, there were people. A first name. An age. A dollar value.

Woman, 30. Boy, 9. Girl, 6.

Jeremy read it twice. Then he stepped back from the table.

"Aunt Lu," he said. "That's people."

"Yes."

"They wrote people down like they was cows."

"Yes, they did." Aunt Lu's voice was very steady. "Some of the families who settled Miller County came out from Kentucky and Tennessee, and they brought enslaved people with them, walking overland behind the wagons, or

on flatboats up the rivers. They weren't asked. They were brought. In 1840 there were a hundred and eleven enslaved people in this county. By 1860 there were two hundred and thirty-eight."

She closed the book gently, as if it might hurt someone.

"Missouri ended slavery in January of 1865. That's less than twenty years ago, Jeremy. That cabin you found may have been where some of them lived. Some of the people who were written in this book may still be alive, maybe not far from here. This isn't old history. It's just history that some folks would rather not look at."

"Why'd you show me?"

"Because you're going to grow up and be a man in this county," said Aunt Lu, "and a man ought to know what ground he's standing on."

From Jeremy's Diary
October 11, 1884

Aunt Lu showed me the old book. I cannot stop thinking about the boy who was 9. That is how old I was when we built the treehouse. Nobody wrote down what he liked or if he had a rooster or a best friend. They only wrote down what he was worth. I think that is the worst thing a person can do, to decide what another person is worth.

Jeremy told Richie and Clara the next day, sitting in the leaning treehouse with the wind creaking the boards.

Richie was quiet a long time. Then he said, "My granddad used to say it wasn't so bad. He said folks was treated all right."

"Was he ever wrote down in a book next to a cow?" asked Clara.

Richie thought about it. "No."

"Then he wouldn't know, would he."

Nobody said anything for a while. Then Richie said, slowly, like he was deciding something for good: "It was wrong. I don't care who did it. It was wrong."

"It was wrong," said Jeremy.

"It was wrong," said Clara.

That winter, a deckhand named Henry Talbert worked the freight boats that came up to the Tuscumbia landing. He was a tall, quiet Black man with a laugh that came out of him all at once, and he could carry a barrel of flour up the landing on one shoulder while singing every verse of "Shall We Gather at the River."

One evening, while the boat was tied up and the freight was going up the stone steps one barrel at a time, Jeremy got up his nerve and asked him about the old days.

Mr. Talbert looked out at the water for a long time.

"My mama was brought out from Kentucky when she was littler than you," he said. "Walked the whole way behind a wagon. She told me she counted the rivers they crossed so she'd always know the way home. She never did get to go back." He smiled, not a happy smile, but not a bitter one either. "Now I work the river free, and I get paid, and I go where I please. That's something she never had. So I sing for her."

Jeremy didn't know what to say. So he said the only true thing he could think of.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Talbert. It was wrong."

"Yes, son," said Henry Talbert gently. "It was. You remember that, and you'll be all right."

From the Archives



"Traveling by flatboat": a family, their goods and their horses on a flatboat on the Tennessee River. Engraving by Alfred R. Waud, made between 1855 and 1890.

The Historic New Orleans Collection; published in The Century Magazine, 1916. Public domain. Via Wikimedia Commons.



Black workers loading the steamboat General Meade (1875–1888), a Missouri River boat. A "General Mead" appears on the Miller County Museum's list of Osage River boats of the 1870s; it is not certain that it was this same vessel.

Photograph by Rudolph Goebel. Missouri Historical Society, via the Digital Public Library of America and Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

Chapter the Tenth

A Kiss Too Soon



The summer of 1885, Jeremy and Clara were twelve, and everything started to feel different. Clara still beat him at skipping stones. But now when she laughed, Jeremy noticed. When she sat beside him on the bluff above the river with her sunbonnet pushed back and her freckles in the shape of the Big Dipper, he noticed so much he forgot to talk.

At the blackberry pie festival that July, they stood at the same long table under the same old oak where they had met when they were five. Clara held out a slice of pie with both hands, the way she always did.

"You're already ruined," she said.

But she didn't laugh this time. Neither did he.

Afterward they sat on the big flat rock below the landing, where the water ran slow and gold in the evening.

"Jeremy," Clara said. "I have to tell you something."

"All right."

"Papa's taking a job at a mill in St. Louis. We're leaving in September."

It seemed wrong to Jeremy that the river just kept running, as if she hadn't said anything at all.

"St. Louis is far," he said.

"It's not that far."

"It's farther than here."

She had blackberry juice on her lip, and her eyes were shining.

Then she leaned over and kissed him, very quickly, right on the mouth, soft as a moth landing.

They both sat perfectly still. Then they both turned bright red, the color of Old Brass's comb, and looked in opposite directions at the river.

"We're too young for that," Jeremy said finally, in a strangled voice.

"I know," said Clara. "I just wanted to do it once before I left. So you'd remember."

"I'd have remembered anyway."

From Jeremy's Diary
July 18, 1885

Clara is moving to St. Louis. Something else happened at the river that I am not going to write down even in here. Only I will put a mark. X. I will know what it means.

The Whitlows left on a gray September morning in a covered wagon bound for the railroad. Jeremy stood in the middle of the road holding the tin pie plate Clara had given him, the one her mother baked her festival pies in, which she had pressed into his hands that morning and said, "Keep it till I come back for it."

Clara stood in the back of the wagon, waving her sunbonnet, until the dust swallowed her up.

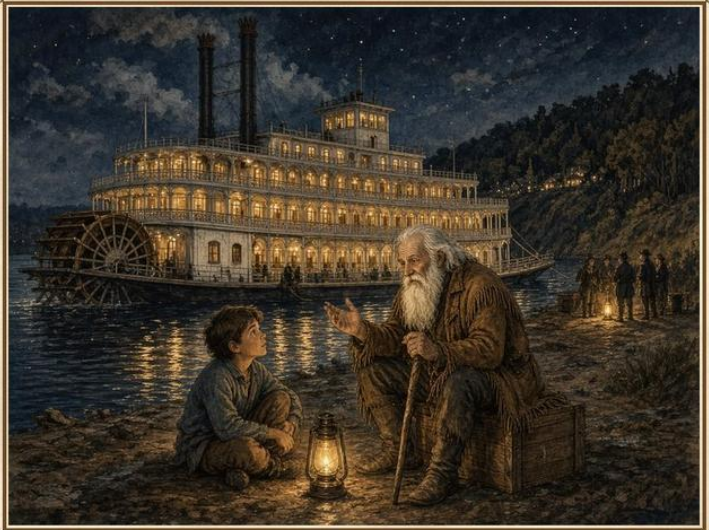
Jeremy stood in the road a long time after.

She wrote three letters that first year. He wrote eleven. Then her mother took sick, and the letters stopped coming, and when Jeremy wrote to the St. Louis address his letter came back with RETURNED, NO SUCH PERSON stamped across it.

He kept the pie plate on the shelf in his room, beside the cigar box of arrowheads, and Ma never once asked him to move it.

Chapter the Eleventh

The Old Man Bound for Arrow Rock



In the spring of 1886, an old man came up the river who had seen more than anybody in Miller County.

His name was Ezra Tolliver, and he was ninety years old, maybe more. He had a white beard down to his belt and a buckskin coat with half the fringe worn off, and he got off the *H. C. Coleman* at Tuscumbia landing to rest his bones for a few days before going on. He was headed, he said, down the Osage to the Missouri and up the Missouri to Arrow Rock, to see the salt springs one last time.

"Boone's Lick," he told the boys, who had followed him from the landing to the bench outside Postock's store like two puppies. "Up near Arrow Rock. You know who made salt at Boone's Lick?"

"Daniel Boone?" guessed Richie.

"His boys," said Ezra Tolliver. "Nathan and Daniel Morgan Boone, his sons. They boiled salt water in great iron kettles and sold the salt all down the river. I was a boy myself then, younger than you two. My daddy hauled wood for those kettles, and I hauled water for my daddy. And one time," he leaned in close, and lowered his voice, "one time an old white-haired gentleman came out to look at the works, and every man there said it was the old man himself."

The boys stopped breathing. "Daniel Boone? The real one?"

"I've always believed so. He was old, by then. Old as I am now, nearly. He looked at me hauling my bucket and said, 'Son, that's honest work. Don't ever be ashamed of honest work.' And then he went on, and I never saw him again." Ezra Tolliver sat back. "That was eighty years ago. He's been gone since 1820. I'm the last one I know of who remembers that day."

He stayed three days at Tuscumbia. Every evening the boys sat with him on a crate down at the landing, with a lantern

between them, while he told them stories of the old river. He told them about flatboats and keelboats and the first steamboats, and about the country before there were any towns at all, when the Osage people still hunted these hills.

On the last night, Jeremy asked him something he had been wondering for a long time.

"Mr. Tolliver, how do you get to be somebody? When you don't have anything?"

The old man laughed, a dry, papery laugh. "Who says you don't have anything?"

"We're poor. My shoes don't match. Richie's coat was his grandma's."

Ezra Tolliver pointed his walking stick at the river, running dark and silver in the moonlight.

"You've got that," he said. "That river goes to the Missouri, and the Missouri goes to the Mississippi, and the Mississippi goes to the whole wide world. A boy who's got nothing but a river has got a road to everywhere. Most folks never figure that out. They're too busy looking at their shoes."

The next morning he got back on the boat and went down the river, and they never heard of him again.

From Jeremy's Diary
May 3, 1886

Mr. Tolliver says a boy with nothing but a river has a road to everywhere. I have been thinking about it all day. I have the river. I have Ma and Pa and Aunt Lu and Richie and Old Brass. I think that is a lot of nothing.

The years went down the river, one after another, like boats.

Jeremy grew tall. He grew so tall that the secondhand shoes from the barrel stopped fitting and Pa had to order him a real pair from the Wish Book, which took five weeks and arrived one size too small. He finished school. He worked in the store. And on long summer evenings he played baseball in the pasture behind the Baptist church with Richie and every other boy in town, using a stick for a bat and a ball Ma had wound out of yarn and covered with leather from an old boot.

He was good. Everyone said so. He could hit a ball clean over the church roof, and once, to the preacher's lasting sorrow, through the church window. He could throw from center field to home plate on a line, hard and true, like a hawk going after a rabbit.

In the winter of 1889, Old Brass died.

He was very old for a rooster, nearly as old as a rooster could be. One cold morning he didn't crow, and Jeremy, sixteen and nearly a man, went out to the fence and found him curled in the straw of the henhouse as if he had only gone to sleep.

Jeremy buried him under the big white oak, below the leaning treehouse, and put a flat river stone over the place. Then he sat down beside it in the snow and cried harder than he had cried since the day Clara's wagon went away up the hill.

Pa came out after a while and sat down beside him without saying anything. He just sat. That was the kind of thing Pa knew how to do.

"He called up the sun every morning of my life," Jeremy said finally.

"I know," said Pa. "Now the sun'll have to remember on its own. And so will you."

The next spring, one of Old Brass's grandsons climbed up on the split-rail fence, puffed himself up like a preacher, and let out a crow so loud and so cracked and so terrible that the whole family came running out in their nightclothes.

"Well," said Ma, wiping her eyes and laughing, "he'll get better."

They named him Young Brass. He did get better.

In the summer of 1891, when Jeremy was eighteen, Pa called him into the back room of the store and shut the door.

On the table sat a coffee can. It was an old one, the label long gone, dented on one side. Pa slid it across the table.

"Open it."

Inside was a bankbook from Captain Thorncroft's bank, and the numbers in it went down page after page in the Captain's careful hand. Five dollars. Two dollars. Ten dollars. Fifty cents. Every month, for eighteen years.

"I opened that account the week you were born," Pa said. "Every time somebody paid off their credit, I put a little in. Every good corn year, a little more. Your mother knows. Lu knows. The Captain knows. Nobody else."

Jeremy stared at the book. He couldn't speak.

"It's enough for college," said Pa. "The university at Columbia. Your Aunt Lu has already written to them." He cleared his throat very loudly, the way Mr. Pruitt had, once. "I never had the chance. My daddy never had the chance. But so help me, son, you're going to have it."

It was the only time in his life Jeremy ever saw his father cry. Pa said it was the dust in the back room. There was dust. That part was true.

He left Tuscumbia that September on the biggest boat that ever landed there.

She was called the *Golden Gate*, and she was a wonder: a four-deck steamer two hundred and fifty feet long, with a cabin for the laborers above the main deck, the officers' rooms above that, and the pilot house up on top, so high it seemed to touch the clouds. When she came around the bend at dusk with every window lit and her whistle shaking the bluffs, the whole town came out to watch, the way they had come out for the little mail boat ten years before.

Jeremy carried his trunk down the three hundred stone steps himself, the way the mail sacks had always come up them, and the whole town came down behind him, step after step, lanterns bobbing through the dark woods on the right.

Ma cried. Aunt Lu cried. Richie, who was by then a grown man with a farm of his own up Saline Creek, punched Jeremy in the arm so hard it bruised, then hugged him so hard it bruised again.

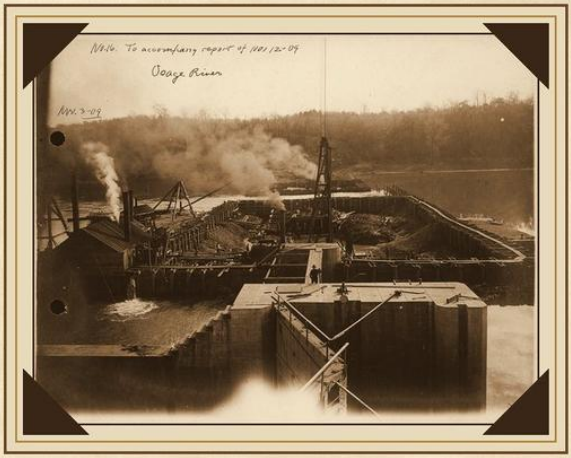
"Don't you forget us," Richie said.

"I couldn't if I tried."

Captain Thorncroft, so old now that he leaned on two canes, pressed a peppermint stick into Jeremy's hand at the foot of the gangplank.

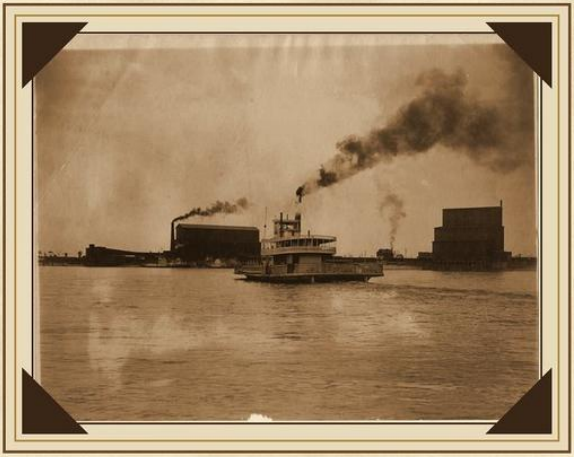
"For the road to everywhere," the old man said.

From the Archives



Work on the Osage River, Missouri, November 3, 1909: a cofferdam where a new Chanoine dam was being built during federal lock-and-dam work. The record does not name the exact site.

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA 285932). Public domain. Via Wikimedia Commons.



The ferryboat Samuel B. Wiggins of the Wiggins Ferry Company at St. Louis (date not recorded).

Missouri Historical Society, via the Digital Public Library of America and Wikimedia Commons. No known restrictions.

Chapter the Twelfth

Nothing But the River



Columbia, Missouri, was the biggest town Jeremy had ever seen, and for the first month he was sure everybody in it could tell that his shoes had come out of a barrel.

Nobody could. Or if they could, they didn't care. He studied harder than he had ever studied, by lamplight, in a cold rented room, and wrote home every Sunday. And in the spring, when the ground thawed, he found the ballfield.

The boy who had once hit a yarn ball through the Baptist church window could hit a real one a country mile.

The boy who had thrown from the pasture to the churchyard on a line could throw out a runner from deep center field. Men started coming out to watch him. Then men started coming out from other towns to watch him.

From Jeremy's Diary

May 14, 1893

Hit a ball today that they say is still rolling. A man in a gray suit wrote my name in a little book. Ma, if you ever read this, I am still studying. Mostly.

In the spring of 1894, a letter came with a Cincinnati postmark.

It was from the Cincinnati baseball club, the Reds, the team that had been founded in 1881, played its first season in 1882 and won the American Association championship that very year, and joined the National League in 1890. They had heard about a center fielder out in Missouri who could hit and throw. They wanted to see him.

Jeremy read it in his room. Then he read it again. Then he walked down to the river at Columbia, the creek there that wandered down toward the Missouri, the same Missouri that took in the Osage, and stood a while.

A boy who's got nothing but a river has got a road to everywhere.

He went to Cincinnati.

He played for the Reds for six seasons, from 1894 through 1899. He was never the most famous man on the team, and the newspapers spelled his name four different ways, but he was steady and honest and hard to fool. He played every inning like it was the bottom of the ninth. When a call went against him, he tipped his cap and went back to center field. When the umpire made a call for him that he knew was wrong, he said so, which made the other players think he was crazy and made the umpires love him.

"Postock," a teammate asked him once, "where'd you learn to be so blamed honest?"

"From a man with a jar of candy," said Jeremy.

From Jeremy's Diary
September 2, 1896

Sent most of my pay home to the bank again. Pa wrote that he does not need it. I wrote back that I do not need it either, but the Captain's bank does, and every child in Tuscumbia needs a dollar on a Saturday.

That winter, the letter came telling him Captain Elias Thorncroft had died in his sleep at ninety-one. He had left the bank in good hands and the candy jar full, with a note

in his will that it was to be kept full forever. Jeremy sat on the edge of his hotel bed in Cincinnati and cried like a boy.

He came home in the summer of 1900.

He came up the Osage on a steamboat, the same river, the same bluffs, the same white sycamore still leaning out over its island four miles below town. He was twenty-seven years old. He had a good suit, and a bank account that would have made Captain Thorncroft whistle, and he had not worn secondhand shoes in many years.

He still stood at the rail like a boy and watched for the courthouse on the hill. There it was, great and red and majestic at the top of its massive hill, and below it the long gray line of the stone steps running down through the woods to the landing.

When the boat tied up, he did not wait for the gangplank to settle. He went up those three hundred steps two at a time, the way he had at eight years old, past the houses in the woods, past the wobbly step and the worn ones, and he was laughing by the time he reached the top.

The whole town was waiting at the top. Ma, gray now, and Pa, stooped, with his fiddle case under his arm out of pure habit. Aunt Lu, with ink on her fingers. Richie and his wife and three little Mellises, all of whom had been told so many stories about Uncle Jeremy that they seemed disappointed he was only regular-sized.

Up on the hill, on the split-rail fence, Young Brass crowed.

"He's been practicing," said Ma.

It was July. And in July, in Tuscumbia, there was only one thing to do.

The blackberry pie festival was bigger than he remembered and exactly the same. The long plank tables were under the same old oak. The Baptist ladies were pretending their pies weren't their best ones. The Methodist ladies were pretending the same. Children ran screaming through the grass with purple faces.

Jeremy stood at the end of the long table, and suddenly he was five years old again, and twelve, and every age in between. He had to look up at the oak leaves for a while.

Then someone beside him said:

"You're going to get pie on that nice suit."

He turned around.

She wore a yellow sunbonnet, a grown woman's sunbonnet now, and under it were freckles in the exact shape of the Big Dipper. In both hands, held out carefully, she had a slice of blackberry pie.

"Clara," he said. It was all he could say.

"I'm the new schoolteacher," said Clara Whitlow. "Came back in the spring. Mama passed when we'd only been in St. Louis a year, and we moved twice after, and I

lost your address, and I was too proud to write the courthouse to find it." Her voice wobbled. "I heard you were coming home. I've been making this pie for three days. I kept getting it wrong."

He looked at the pie. He looked at her.

"I still have your mother's pie plate," he said. "You said to keep it till you came back for it."

Clara Whitlow, schoolteacher, began to cry right there in front of the whole Baptist church. Then she laughed, the laugh that went up at the end like a question, and she held out the pie a little farther.

"Well, go on," she said. "You're already ruined."

He ate it. With his fingers. In his good suit. In front of everybody.

Mrs. Kettering, very old now, told them to hush, there were Baptists present.

They were married that October in the little Baptist church below the courthouse, with the river shining at the bottom of the hill and every window open to the autumn air.

Richie stood up as best man and lost the ring twice, once in his pocket and once in his other pocket. Ma cried from the first hymn to the last. Mr. Silas Pruitt, white-bearded now, sat in the front row wrapped in a striped wool blanket that looked remarkably familiar. The

smallest Pruitt girl, grown and married herself, danced with Jeremy at the supper afterward and stood on his shoes for old times' sake.

Pa played the fiddle. He played "Soldier's Joy" and "Turkey in the Straw," and he tapped his foot so hard the dishes jumped. There was hot chocolate. There was a dried-apple stack cake seven layers high. And at the end of the evening, before anyone went home, Pa set the fiddle down and opened the old family Bible on the table and wrote two names together inside the front cover in his slow, careful hand.

The next morning, at the top of the three hundred stone steps, in the brick courthouse, Aunt Lu entered the marriage into the county's books herself, in her finest slanting script, at her desk by the window that looked out over the river.

"Best view in Miller County," she said, blotting the ink. "And I got to write the best thing in it."

Jeremy and Clara built a house on the bluff above the river, with a porch that faced the water and a henhouse out back and a fence just right for a rooster to stand on.

And on Saturday mornings in summer, a row of children sat on their front steps, barefoot, patched, hair combed with water, waiting.

Jeremy paid them a dollar each to paint his fence. He kept a big glass jar of peppermint sticks on the porch rail. And once, for every child, he paid two dollars instead of one, and waited quietly to see who would walk back up the steps.

From Jeremy's Diary
October 21, 1900

Married Clara Whitlow today. I have written in this book since I was eight years old. Aunt Lu said a man who writes his days lives them twice. I would live every one of them twice. Even the flood. Even the day Old Brass died. Even the day the wagon went up the hill. Because every one of them was a road, and every road came home.

Young Brass crowed 14 *times this morning. I counted. Clara says that is showing off.*

The End

A Note on the History

Jeremy Postock, his family, Richie Mellis, Clara Whitlow, Captain Elias Thorncroft, Ezra Tolliver, Henry Talbert, the Pruitts and the Ketterings are all invented. So are Captain Thorncroft's bank, the blackberry pie festival and the leaning sycamore. The river and the town are real, and the history behind the story was checked against the sources below.

The Town and the Courthouse

Miller County was organized in 1837, and Tuscumbia was chosen as its county seat that year. The first courthouse, a hewn-log building, was begun in 1839. In November 1857 the county let the contract for a two-story brick courthouse, 56 by 40 feet. It was finished in 1858 and formally accepted in February 1859. The bricks were of such poor quality that the court had the building painted with two coats of red paint. In 1910–13 that brick courthouse became the center block of a remodeled limestone courthouse, which still stands on the hill above the river.

The Steamboats

Steamboats ran on the Osage from the late 1830s and were busiest in the 1870s and 1880s, carrying wheat, livestock, lumber, railroad ties, merchandise and mail. Boats named in local records include the H. C. Coleman, the Frederick and the John R. Hugo. The little mail steamer Tuscumbia began carrying mail from Jefferson City in the spring of 1881. Her schedule had her leaving Jefferson City at 6 a.m. and reaching Tuscumbia at 6 p.m., about 75 miles by river. Local histories call the Golden Gate the largest and grandest boat ever to land at Tuscumbia. She was a four-decker, given as 250 feet long in one museum account and 260 in another. The Osage flooded about twice a year.

Slavery in Miller County

Most enslaved people in the county were brought by white settler families from Kentucky and Tennessee, overland or by flatboat. Federal censuses counted 111 enslaved people in Miller County in 1840, 189 in 1850 and 238 in 1860. Missouri abolished slavery in January 1865.

Boone, Ward and the Reds

Daniel Boone died in Missouri in 1820. His sons Nathan and Daniel Morgan Boone made salt at Boone's Lick, near Arrow Rock, from about 1805. Ezra's memory of seeing the old man there is invented. Montgomery Ward began selling by mail from Chicago in 1872. The present Cincinnati Reds franchise was founded in 1881, won the American Association in its first season of 1882 and joined the National League in 1890.

Sources

Miller County Museum & Historical Society (millercountymuseum.org): "River Navigation," President's Pages, and "Navigating the Osage River in Missouri, 1839–1926." University of Missouri Extension, "Missouri Courthouses: Miller County." U.S. census slave schedules for Miller County. The roughly 300 stone steps from the landing to the courthouse come from local recollection shared for this book; they are not described in the sources above.

Photographs & Credits

Historical Photographs

Every photograph and map in this book is real; only sepia toning and framing were added. Each caption gives what, where, when and the source.

Tuscumbia map sheet, U.S. Geological Survey, 1886. Public domain; University of Texas Libraries PCL Map Collection, via Wikimedia Commons.

Old Miller County courthouse, Tuscumbia, June 2026. Photograph by TCP04, CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Log cabins at the Miller County Museum, Tuscumbia, June 2026. Photograph by TCP04, CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Steamboats Montana and Penguin at the St. Charles bridge, about 1880. UW–La Crosse Historic Steamboat Photographs. Public domain.

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Osage River lock-and-dam work, November 3, 1909. U.S. National Archives (NARA 285932). Public domain.

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A boy with mismatched shoes.
A rooster who calls up the sun.
Three hundred stone steps
from the river to the courthouse,
and a girl with a slice of blackberry pie.

On the Osage River in the 1880s,
Jeremy Postock has nothing
but the river.
An old man once told him
that is a road to everywhere.

THE BOY FROM TUSCUMBIA LANDING