

## Working the Mississippi: Two Centuries of Life on the River

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sources into a comprehensive account of some of the dangers that faced the newly formed United States at that time, an account that casts new light on the life of one of America's most famous figures between late 1797 and 1803. The voyage down the Mississippi helped shape the river experiences and skills that Clark put to such good use on what he would call his "western travels" – the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

*Brown Water: A Narrative of My Personal Journey in the Wake of Lewis and Clark*, by Butch Bouvier. Onawa, Iowa: Butch Bouvier (keelboat@long-lines.com), 2015. xv, 186 pp. Illustrations, glossary. \$20.00 paperback.

Reviewer Norman Fry is a retired Southeastern Community College American history instructor with a longstanding interest in life in Iowa's small towns and along the Mississippi River.

*Brown Water* is Butch Bouvier's personal narrative of his boat journey along the route taken by Lewis and Clark on the Missouri River. Bouvier describes himself as a "hands on" historian with a passion for living history, and his goal is not only to take the journey but to recreate the boats used by early river explorers. The narrative of *Brown Water* is composed of three parts. The first is Bouvier's own narrative describing the boat building and the journey. The second narrative, written in journals given to the crew by the author, offers the volunteer crew's perspective on the river journey. The third narrative includes "Knowledge Nooks," short explanatory inserts that illustrate the history and techniques of boat building.

Rather than a standard history, *Brown Water* is a modern boatwright's account of the building of traditional riverboats. Bouvier gives abundant details on the selection of wood for boat construction, the construction process, and the navigation by shallow draft keelboats and pirogues. Readers interested in riverboat architecture will find Bouvier's book an informative read. Readers fascinated by a personal adventure story, one that relates that adventure to the history of early Iowa and the perils of navigating the Missouri River, will find *Brown Water* a raconteur's delight.

*Working the Mississippi: Two Centuries of Life on the River*, by Bonnie Stepenoff. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015. xxii, 182 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$36.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Patrick Nunnally is editor of *Open Rivers: Rethinking the Mississippi*, a digital journal published by the University of Minnesota.

The middle Mississippi—that stretch between St. Louis and Memphis—is Mark Twain’s river. The stretch lacks the Delta’s romance or the approachable sense of the river farther north. The middle Mississippi is where the river really becomes “America’s River,” carrying massive amounts of freight as well as the freighted meanings that have made the river such an iconic part of American life. Bonnie Stepenoff’s book is a very approachable way to begin to understand the place.

Stepenoff’s focus is on the myriad people who work on and closely alongside the river. She introduces readers to boat captains and cooks, pilots, gamblers, and roustabouts, all of the upstanding as well as shady characters who have made the river their home. For the most part, these are voices not often heard; their inclusion, whether from oral history accounts or from other documents, is one of the book’s strengths.

A challenge for those who write about the river is how to organize their material—whether to employ chronology or geography as their central structure. Stepenoff alternates chapters on particular cities and towns, working from north to south, with chapters on classes of river workers. A chapter on Cairo, Illinois, is followed by her discussion of engineers, which is followed in turn by a focus on New Madrid, Missouri. This approach is generally satisfactory but does at times mean a loss of thematic continuity. Stepenoff’s vivid, accessible prose makes her ideas and points readily understandable, though.

*Working the Mississippi* is not analytical in the way much conventional scholarship is. For example, she closes her chapter on the troubled city of Cairo, Illinois, by stating that no single cause led to the city’s troubles, “but some of its woes came straight from the river” (88). Perhaps she feels it would be speculative to explore how troubles “straight from the river” influence, or are influenced by, troubles that originate on land, but some further discussion is probably warranted. The idea is too intriguing just to drop.

There is an almost playful sense to Stepenoff’s approach that contrasts well with deeper analytical tomes. One of many little-known tidbits in the book is that Chester, Illinois, an otherwise forgettable small town, was the home of Elzie Crisler Segar, creator of the comic book character Popeye, the Sailor Man. Townspeople have long speculated who the local counterparts were for such nationally recognized figures as Wimpy, Bluto, and Olive Oyl. It turns out the Mississippi River and the communities on its banks have a greater resonance in the national imagination than even the most knowledgeable river rat might have guessed.

Throughout *Working the Mississippi* Stepenoff illustrates, but does not explicitly make an argument about, the myriad ways the Mississippi

River's story illuminates so many other stories central to the region's and nation's history. Many scholars of the Mississippi treat the river as important in and of itself, a *sui generis* geographical and historical phenomenon that is important simply because of its size and centrality to the continent. Of course, that is true; it would be hard to imagine a history or geography of the region that did not take the Mississippi fundamentally into account. Stepenoff's "smaller" stories, which originate from a particular place or a particular type of work, make very clear how much the river and its corridor of influence have to say to historians of such seemingly disparate subjects as race, class, labor, or gender. Her work provides material for scholars and others interested in how communities work, whether local influences trump national patterns, or how much influence individuals have on particular events, as opposed to the context of their place and time.

Ultimately, that is perhaps the greatest value of Stepenoff's book: she invites readers to look more closely at subjects they may have a passing familiarity with, and, by doing so, to see connections to ideas and things that they had not thought of as associated with the Mississippi River at all. Hers is not at all the "last word" on the Mississippi River, but rather the first word on a host of subjects that are touched by the river.

*Remember Me to Miss Louisa: Hidden Black-White Intimacies in Antebellum America*, by Sharony Green. Early American Places. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015. xvii, 199 pp. Illustrations, chart, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Darrel E. Bigham is emeritus professor of history and director of Historic Southern Indiana, University of Southern Indiana. He is the author of *On Jordan's Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley* (2005).

The title of this brief work suggests the need to explore the little-known bonds of affection between slaves or freedpeople and their current or former white owners. The locus is Cincinnati, the midwestern border city with the largest number of African Americans in the antebellum period, where many unmarried mothers settled with their children born of unions with white masters. Many of these were "fancy," attractive, fair-skinned women whose children were deemed, in the language of the day, "mulatto," often able to "pass" as whites.

Green wants us to examine not only the well-known matrifocal trend in black families but also the role of white males in the equation. She asserts, "The historical record shows that there was often reciprocal regard, warmth, and even caring in settings where whites and blacks