Written by Jeff Ignatius
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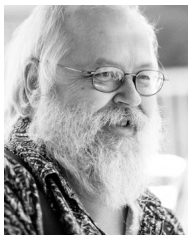
"Many in the crowd got roaring drunk – and the drunks at their most extreme were hard to tell apart from the fallers and the jerkers and the howlers. Others gave in to the general mood of riot and began fighting and beating each other up over nothing. But what made the camp meetings truly infamous were the orgies."



This is not the Mississippi River that most people remember from Mark Twain. This is the real deal in all its lurid detail.

Lee Sandlin, who will be speaking at the Bettendorf Public Library on September 27 and the Upper Mississippi River Conference on September 28, said in a recent phone interview that he aimed to re-create "the Mississippi River culture in the first half of the 19th Century" in his 2010 book *Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild*. "Basically what I'm doing is trying to introduce people to that kind of very strange little world that had formed then around the river."

"Very strange little world" is the gentle way of putting it.

The quotation that begins this article comes from Sandlin's section on camp meetings, which he writes "were a routine fixture of life in the valley from the beginning of the 19th Century until sometime in the 1840s. They were wild and disorienting events. ...

"A typical meeting began in a low-key, almost solemn way. A preacher gave a sermon of welcome and led a prayer for peace and community. This was followed by the singing of several hymns. Then there would be more sermons. Gradually, as the hours went by, the atmosphere changed."

Spiritual fervor took hold over the week-long meetings, and in that context came the drinking,

the falling, the jerking, the howling, and the fighting. And the orgies: "The meetings were always intensely erotic experiences," he continues. "In the pervasive atmosphere of extreme excitement, people weren't all that careful to make a distinction between religious ecstasy and sexual hunger. ... According to one scandalized report from a vigilance committee, a woman at one camp meeting invited six men to meet with her in the woods at the same time."

Sandlin said that after his initial research for the book, he wasn't surprised to find mentions of camp meetings. What *did* shock him was the volume of firsthand accounts of the gatherings, and "how insane they were, how close they were to pagan orgies. I'd read references to that, but I hadn't realized that I'd be able to find so many people who were describing them directly, and just how bizarre they were."

The first draft of *Wicked River*, he said, was full of quotations from those sources, "simply because I thought that people would think I'd made it all up. ...

"I didn't have to exaggerate anything. I kept on thinking, 'No one is going to believe this.' I put in a lot of long quotes initially, and the publisher said, 'We're not paying for other people's quotes; we're paying for your words.' ... I really felt like this was just extraordinary how strange and violent and chaotic this environment was."

A Foreign Planet

"Soon after the squirrels left, the comet disappeared. And then the earthquakes began."

Prior to *Wicked River*, Sandlin's writing career had focused on essays for the *Chicago Reader*. But that publication's famously generous leash with writers disappeared about eight years ago as a result of Craigslist, he said; his last long-form piece for the *Reader*, "The Distancers," was intended to run in two parts but was instead serialized in 12 issues in 2004.

That pushed him toward books, and one idea was to write about the Mississippi River.

"I had been writing a lot of things about the Midwest, and when you do that, you keep on sort of bumping up against the Mississippi," he said. "It fascinated me historically, that here's this huge thing sitting right in the middle of our country, and people didn't seem to know very much about it. People don't spend a lot of time traveling on it now. ...

"The specific trigger was that I came across an odd fact that Mark Twain – who everybody associates with the river – when he wrote *Life on the Mississippi* and *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* [between 1876 and 1884] hadn't actually been on the Mississippi in 20 years. His books were acts of nostalgia; they were re-creations of the way the river had *been*, and it was no longer like that around the time of his writing." And Twain's experiences as a river pilot missed the entire first half of the 19th Century.

So Sandlin began doing research that, he said, "would have probably been impossible ... 15 or 20 years ago." Google Books, a project that started in 2004, had scanned huge numbers of public-domain books from the 1800s. "It turns out that there was a vast library of books written about the Mississippi in the first half of the 19th Century," he said. "Very few of which have been reprinted since then. And I don't think very many of which have been *read* at all since maybe the Civil War. And all of them are available in the Google archives if you can find them."

These included traveler's tales, letters, histories, essays, and reflections found in regional libraries. While these books survived, he said, "even by Twain's time, they were hard to find." Now, more than a century later, they are available to anybody with an Internet connection.

Collectively, the works hardly captured the full range of river life. "There are blank spots up and down the line," he said. "I was able to find huge masses of material about the everyday life on the river, but there were a lot of voices I wanted to hear that just don't seem to exist. There's not very much, for instance, written by women who were living on the river then. And I really felt that as an absence."

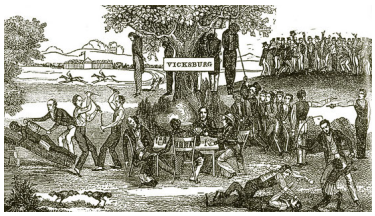
But Sandlin had more than enough source material for his book. And "the more I found," he said, "the less it seemed to resemble Twain."

Consider *Wicked River*, then, an attempt to wipe out idyllic visions of the Mississippi. "The simplest way of doing it was just to tell these stories," he said. "Because the more stories I found, the more bizarre the river became to me. There's this old saying: 'The past is a foreign country.' And after a certain point, I started to feel like the Mississippi is a foreign *planet*. It was *so* odd compared to what I was expecting. ... The nostalgia just seemed to evaporate on its own. ...

"There were a lot of surprises in the material, because each chapter was a new exploration. And I didn't really know what I was going to find, other than a general sense. I'd read enough to know that New Orleans was a very interesting place before the Civil War. Not that it's dull now, but it was *very* strange then. So each chapter that I would get into, there would be sometimes major surprises along the way."

And Sandlin said that even many of the most outlandish tales are corroborated: "There's so much available that nobody has looked at. There are so many testimonies and so many memoirs that there really weren't many things that I found where it was like, 'Oh, this *one guy* told the story.' ... The thing that surprised me is just how well documented most of it was. ... 'Did that one guy just make it up? ... No, no, I can find 10 more books, all of them talking about the same thing.' ...

"The world is kind of a stranger place than we think it is. ... The more accurately I describe it, the stranger it started to seem. I think that's a fairly common experience of writing history."



Ad-Hoc Civilization

"They routinely disposed of their victims by gutting them, filling their body cavities with rocks and stones, sewing them up again, and throwing them overboard so they'd sink without a trace."

So you've got the camp meetings, the vicious pirates of the above quote, the gambling, the medicine men, the sex slaves, the booze, the freak weather, the everyday dangers of river travel, and the nighttime "loose, floating cities" of boats.

The fiery demise of the *Sultana*, the hanging of gamblers in Vicksburg, the grand criminal plan (in the guise of a slave insurrection) of "celebrated local horse-thief and slave-stealer" John Murrell, and the mystery of the "Mound Builders."

And the dangerous, raucous, but blended New Orleans. "Free Negroes and slaves were allowed to gather in large numbers in the public squares, and they were known sometimes to mock and taunt white passersby ... ," Sandlin writes. "Prosperous men of color were openly invited into the homes of white aristocrats. ... [B]lack Catholics could attend any service they liked. There were even notorious brothels with both black and white prostitutes. Respectable brothels everywhere else in the South were strictly segregated.

"The most sinister sight was the presence of African culture on the streets. ... In New Orleans there were voodoo shops openly advertising for business."

Sandlin is primarily interested in the *culture*, which is why he concentrates on the densely populated lower Mississippi. While you'll find passing mentions of the Rock Island Rapids and the Black Hawk War and a description of the topographic features of the upper Mississippi in *Wicked River*
, if you're looking for Quad Cities history, you'll be disappointed. "The whole upper river was kind of thinly settled" in the early 19th Century, Sandlin said. "There's probably a whole second book to be done just about the upper valley. ... I kind of went where all the dramatic color was."

He didn't merely want to tell a history colored with gaudy hues; he uses that technique to help readers understand through immediacy that history is much more compelling than most of us

give it credit for. "People routinely think history is dull," Sandlin said. "But I think that's because history is presented to people as something that is fundamentally settled. ... It's fixed; the story's over; we're just telling you how we got here today. And that's not how it felt to the people of the time. At the time, everything felt open. The people in those eras felt a sense of tremendous possibility, all of which, when we look back, we can no longer see, because we know how the story ends. That sense that they had a richness of experience that we've lost really fascinates me."

The Mississippi then was a frontier, and stories from those areas tend to be full of bizarre and funny and extreme characters and anecdotes. "Frontiers are always strange in that way," Sandlin said. "Because a lot of the people who are going out to frontiers are doing it because they don't want to have anything do with current civilization. ... There's some sort of odd period where people seem to be entirely making up their own rules. ... They're literally like: 'We're starting the world over again.'"

In the first half of the 19th Century, he noted, the population of the lower Mississippi doubled multiple times, and it was physically isolated from the East Coast. "That tends to create this kind of ad-hoc civilization," he said. "They really thought they were building something new. And usually, of course, what happens [eventually] is that the frontier moves on, and civilization starts absorbing the old frontier ... ."

Beyond the aggregate oddity of Mississippi life, the author takes care to tell the stories of individuals, such as the malcontent, sickly minister Timothy Flint. Sandlin has a certain amount of fun at his expense: The man was "stiff-necked, querulous, and perpetually aggrieved," Sandlin writes. "A college friend observed of him that there were two striking aspects to his character: He was useless at social intercourse and he was entirely ignorant of human nature. This all made him (it was surely felt by the Missionary Society of Connecticut) perfect for his job."

And he writes that when one of Flint's children died shortly after her birth – following a storm that nearly wiped out his entire family – the man expressed little emotion: He "had a certain natural callousness. He was curiously unmoved by the suffering and death of other people – even people in his family. It was characteristic of him that in his account of the river journey, he didn't spare a single thought for what his other children had gone through that night, left to fend for themselves on the sandbar while the storm raged."

The author isn't judgmental, though. While Flint was perhaps unusually self-absorbed, his attitude was "typical" of the place and the era. "People did not as a rule display a lot of empathy for other people's problems," Sandlin writes. "The river discouraged it – life on the river was so dangerous, so unpredictable, and so casually violent that it couldn't help but leave its inhabitants coarsened."

A Garish Panorama

"The most expensive slaves for sale in New Orleans couldn't be obtained at either the auctions or the yards. These were the slave girls sold for sex. They were called fancy girls, and they went for thirty-five hundred up to five thousand dollars."

Within any given chapter of *Wicked River*, Sandlin is focused, employing prose that's exact, authoritative, and vivid. "I didn't want to write it in a pastiche 19th Century style," he said, but he also aimed to avoid something too modern. "I wanted to write it in such a way that if any of those people then had read it, they wouldn't have found it
bizarre
. ... I wanted to have a certain authentic period feel."

The book walks that line well, accessible and direct while still a touch quaint. These extraordinary stories are presently matter-of-factly without sacrificing the wonder that contemporary audiences will naturally feel.

Structurally, though, *Wicked River* has what a *Wall Street Journal* critic called a "meandering method – consciously so, one suspects. Mr. Sandlin follows the river through time but loosely, curving off into different dark regions of its past yet always bearing you forward."

This articulates one of the key charms of the book, as Sandlin has no interest in offering a complete, thorough half-century-plus portrait of the river. Instead, he's selectively mining disparate sources to get at things richer than names, dates, and events: a *feel* for the period

before it became "settled" history.

By using his own voice and jumping from subject to subject – one gets the sense that he only wrote about things that interested him – the author is creating a patchwork quilt, one that reflects its creator as much as its subject. As the *Chicago Tribune* noted: "When it comes to writing about the river, Sandlin is fatally, deliriously, deliciously compromised. Clearly, he loves it. He loves stories about it."

He is essentially rescuing the river from the effects of time and sober classroom instruction and the waterway as it flows now. As Sandlin writes in his introduction: "Every inch of its course from its headwaters to its delta is regulated by synthetic means – by locks and dams and artificial lakes, revetments and spillways and control structures, chevrons and wing dams and bendway weirs. The resulting edifice can barely be called a river at all, in any traditional sense. The Mississippi has been dredged, and walled in, and reshaped, and fixed; it has been turned into a gigantic navigation canal, or the world's largest industrial sewer." ("It's not surprising that that's how the Mississippi ends up," he said, noting that rivers throughout history have served as waste depositories. "That it's sort of *consciously* been rebuilt as a sewer is kind of discouraging.")

This type of salvage job is a persistent interest for Sandlin. His next two books are also drawn from 19th Century history: about the discovery of tornadoes and early electrification. To pigeonhole the author, he seems most passionate about unearthing awe – excavating the experience of things that were then new and alien.

The challenges of that goal are sometimes insurmountable. In his essay "Losing the War," Sandlin explores the "falsification" of World War II with his trademark intelligence and curiosity, noting that the process of sanitizing the war began with "the simple refusal of reporters in the field to describe honestly what they were seeing."

The problem in trying to counter that is huge: The genuine experiences of soldiers are largely inaccessible. "My father didn't like telling war stories," he writes. "He'd accumulated fistfuls of medals over there, and he kept them stashed in an anonymous little plush case at the back of his closet, where they went unseen for decades. That was all part of the past, and he had no use for the past. ... In America the war lingers mostly in intimate, private memories."

But like those forgotten texts he found about the Mississippi, "countless mementos surround us if we're willing to look for them. Tinted photographs, punctured helmets, unused books of ration stamps, old combat maps smeared with dried mud – mantels and display cases across America are filled with relics as evocative as the splinters of the True Cross. ... Every one of them preserves, however inarticulately, a piece of the vast and mysterious story of a whole world at war."

Yet these relics, Sandlin writes, are "never quite specific enough. No matter what their occasion was, they sooner or later slip free and are lost in a generic blur: a Day at the Carnival, a Triumph at the State Finals, a Summer Vacation, My First Love. It's particularly true, I think, of the mementos of soldiers, because nobody other than a soldier remembers the details of any war once it's safely over."

The difference with the Mississippi of the early 1800s is that its "mementos" are far more articulate – many thousands of words that have largely gone unread for a century and a half. Recast them and stitch them together as freely and artfully as Sandlin has and you're left with a powerful work that feels vibrant and alive.

Wicked River can easily be called the literary equivalent of what the author uses for its framing device: the panorama, "an oil painting done a gigantic scale – so gigantic that the first sight of it would make spectators gasp ... ," he writes. "They were much too large ever to be displayed all at once. Instead they were shown in theatres, by gaslight, like primordial movies. Two cylinders were set on opposite sides of the stage; the panorama was gradually unrolled from one and wound up on the other."

"People had made these vast, unruly art objects as the only way of getting at the unruliness of the river," he said. "And that's really what the river itself is like."

As one might expect, the more realistic river panoramas were not as popular as one Sandlin called a "grand extravaganza." One artist, he writes, "won the fight over accuracy" but "lost with the public."

Strangely, the reverse seems true with history as most people think of it and are taught it. Reading *Wicked River*, it seems amazing that these wild tales didn't have a longer life, that they

aren't used to inform, illustrate, and illuminate the Mississippi's past.

In our interview, Sandlin fumbled a bit to explain his emphasis on the panoramas in the prologue and epilogue. "Maybe it was reflecting my own ambivalence about how highly colored I was making the river," he said. "I wasn't certain whether my sort of panorama was going to end up on the garish side or the soberly accurate side. I may not have wanted to look at that too closely."

Lee Sandlin will speak on Thursday, September 27, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Bettendorf Public Library (2950 Learning Campus Drive).

Sandlin is also appearing at the Upper Mississippi River Conference on Friday, September 28, from noon to 1 p.m. at the Stoney Creek Inn (101 18th Street in Moline). The cost of the luncheon is $15, and reservations can be made at RiverAction.org or by calling (563)322-2969.

For more information on Sandlin, visit LeeSandlin.com .