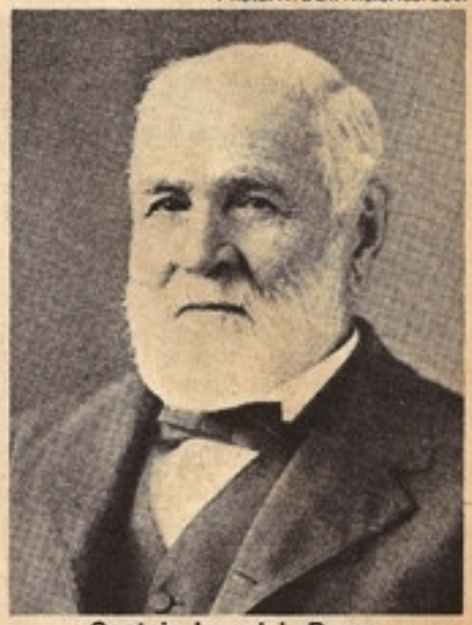
by Joe Koller

PILOT on the

It was a falling wooden barricade and not a heavenly shower of meteorites that laid LaBarge low and almost sent him in a comatose state to the funeral pyre...

Photo: N. Dak. Historical Soc.



Captain Joseph LaBarge.

WHEN CAPTAIN Joseph LaBarge was past the doughty age of 80, he grimly recalled a night of terror when the sky blazed an astral omen and death hung over the flooded Missouri River. By Winter Count—the Sioux people's pictograph calendar—this year of phenomenon was 1833.

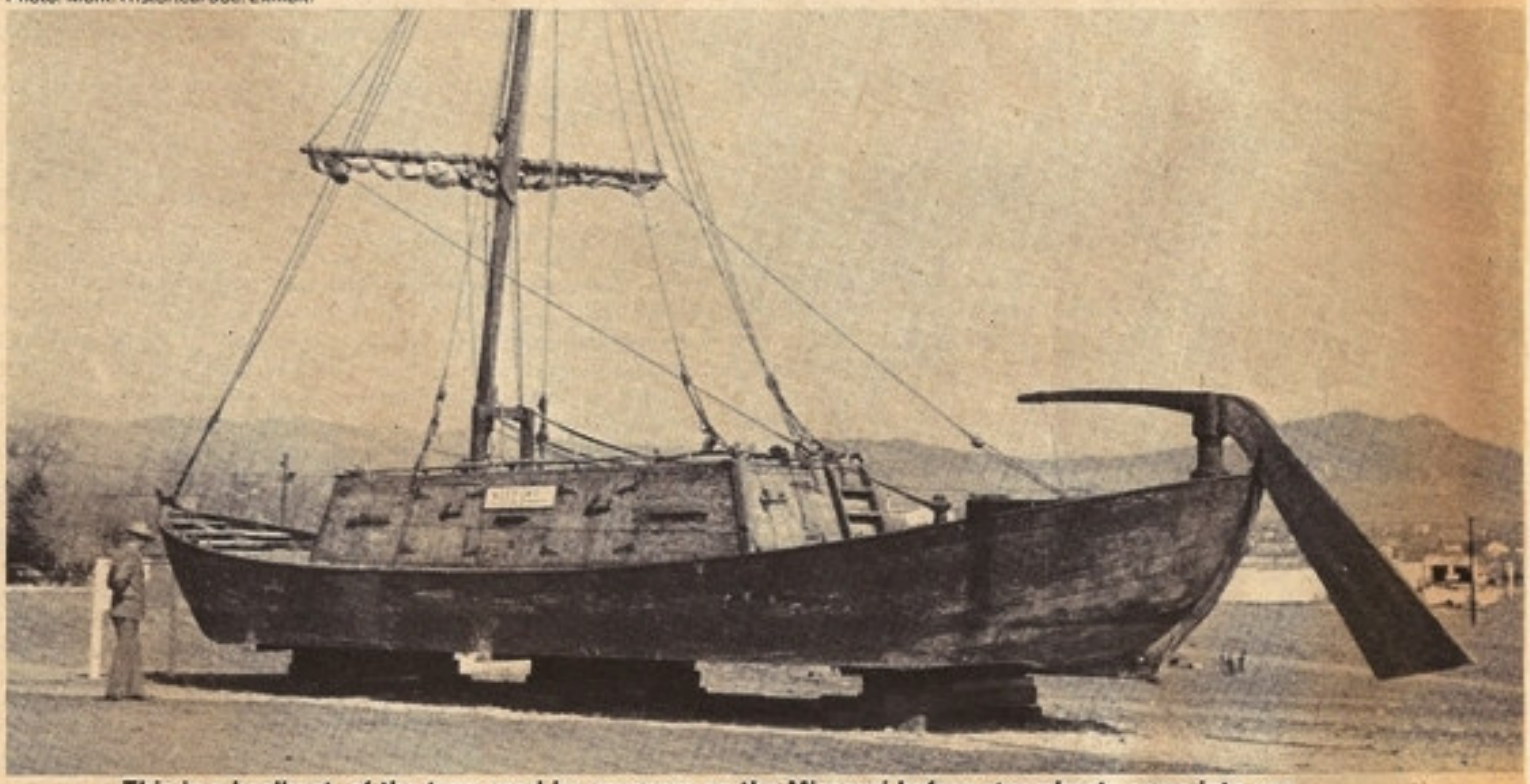
At 18 years of age LaBarge, an apprentice clerk on the American Fur Company's steamboat *Yellowstone*, was headed up the wild Missouri with a $175,000 cargo for Fort Union, the company's trading post. A night stop was made at a timbered island in Dakota and the hawser tied to a tree. Roustabouts went ashore to replenish the ship's fuel supply. As Negroes toiled by firelight an axeman doubled up on the ground and gyrated in agony. Dread took possession of his companions. LaBarge, unaware of this, was in his cabin bunk, dozing off to sleep, but the experience that was to scar his memory for life was just then shaping up.

Young LaBarge was being trained for a trader's life. Pierre Chouteau, merchant prince of St. Louis, had transferred him from store to ship service to broaden his experience under "challenging" conditions.

At this time, too, the northwest of Lewis & Clark was being looted of its fur harvest by the Canadians, who used whiskey and Hudson Bay guns to turn tribes against the licensed American traders that came up the Missouri. For decades this river of hazards knew only the voyagers that paddled and cordelled keelboats upstream to Fort Union and returned by keel or Mackinaw crafts with fur tonnage for the St. Louis market.

The American Fur Company, headed up by Pierre Chouteau and Alexander Mackenzie, planned the defeat of such competition by initiating steam power traffic. In 1832 the *Yellowstone*, a Mississippi side-wheeler, churned its way up

Photo: Mont. Historical Soc. Exhibit.



This is a keelboat, of the type used by voyagers on the Missouri before steamboats came into use.

RIVER OF HAZARDS

the river to Fort Union and back. LaBarge, aboard it, saw Indians fall on their faces at sight of the fire-belching monster that walked on water under the whiteman's magic. However, more knowledgeable squawmen soon dispelled such awe, and the ship was fired on when it returned downriver.

It was LaBarge's ambition to advance from clerk to pilot and from pilot to command. Being Chouteau's protege influenced the Captain to invite LaBarge to the pilothouse to acquaint him with the helmsman's duties and responsibilities. While steering a craft the pilot had to watch the channel and avoid floating trees, buried snags, and hidden sandbars.

One pilot even encouraged LaBarge to take brief turns at the wheel, for the short, stocky youth had been raised on the Mississippi, and knew waterways.

On this second venture up the river the *Yellowstone* was ambushed by Indians on a riverside bluff. One man was killed and three others were wounded in the attack. A plank barricade was erected for emergency cover on deck. That terrible night the ship was safely moored to the island tree and everything seemed shipshape when LaBarge turned in.

He awoke suddenly, his heart pounding as if with presentiment of the difficult time ahead. He heard clamor and pistol shots on the island. There were running steps on deck.

"Cap'n!" someone bawled.

LaBarge, wide awake, noticed a strange ruddy glow that filled the cabin. He was pulling on a pair of breeches when a fiery object streaked past the window. He hastened out on deck and stopped short, transfixed by the awesome spectacle.

The heavens were ablaze. Fiery-tailed suns slashed the firmament, casting a lurid light and emitting a weird roar. The vast riverscape was alive with kaleidoscopic shadows. There was bedlam and commotion on both island and ship. The conglomerated aspects advanced one thought—it was doomsday; the world was being destroyed by fire!

Joseph LaBarge's legs gave way. Cold ague shook him. He was wordless. Roustabouts rushed up the companionway. The panic-stricken Negroes upset the barricade and the plank wall fell on Joseph LaBarge, knocking him out...

When his eyes opened again he was in his bunk. The sun seemed to be shining and the sky was blue. But his head—his bandaged head throbbed with pain and he remembered the barricade falling on him.

Jupitor, the shiny-haired galleycook was bending over him. As LaBarge opened his eyes, the man gave a grunt of relief. "Yuh was bein' toted to the burial fire b'fore us savvied you all was alive, suh." His fat, friendly face offered a grin.

LaBarge remembered the burning clouds. "What happened?" he asked.

Jupitor gave the Captain's explanation. It was a meteor shower. Falling stars. He explained that there had been additional tragedy; an epidemic, and a revolt.

The wood choppers visiting the island had found Indian burials and they had been unable to refrain from molesting them in their greedy search for trophies. Out of such desecration had seeped the fumes of cholera, claiming victims on island and ship. The officers had tried to quell the panic, but it had been next to impossible to command calm. Some men stole small boats and abandoned the ship under fire. Some bewildered Negroes had leaped into the river. The cholera-dead

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Photo: Keller Coll.

A close-up of keelboat superstructure showing the cargo housing.

Photo: S. Dak. Historical Museum.

Dr. Walter A. Burleigh, Dakota Territory's delegate to Congress.

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had been burned on the island, but there were deserters who refused to return to the ship, fearing it was a deathtrap.

LaBarge, wondering how long he had been unconscious, wanted to speak to the Captain, but his aching head weakened him, and his legs would not support him. He leaned heavily on Jupitor and in this way he staggered to the officers' quarters. Without knocking Jupitor opened the door and they entered. He gestured to a figure huddled under a blanket on a bunk.

"Captain, sir?" LaBarge spoke loud enough to wake a sleeper.

There was no reply.

Jupitor pulled aside the blanket, and LaBarge began to realize the extent of the catastrophe. The Captain was a corpse.

"He done left paper writin'," Jupitor said, picking up a sheet of scrawled notepaper off the bedside table.

LaBarge glanced at it. "That's for the pilots," he said, handing it back

"They is dead, too," Jupitor informed him. "All de ship's officers be dead but you, suh!"

The ship moved suddenly and LaBarge lurched against the table. Jupitor uttered a curse, drew a pistol from his belt-band, and darting out on deck started shooting toward the island. The *Yellowstone* was adrift. The island deserters had cut the hawser.

Joseph LaBarge was born in 1815 at St. Louis. His father, a Canadian, had married a Spanish woman and located in Missouri Territory. The couple raised three sons, all of whom became river pilots. Charles was killed in a boat explosion in 1852. John died at the wheel in 1885. Joseph, the eldest, having been educated in St. Louis, was now on board the *Yellowstone* on the river of hazards.

Joseph Marie LaBarge, the father of the boys, had been up the Missouri with General Ashley in 1823 and had taken part in the voyagers' fight against the hostile Rees in Dakota. Such a heritage imbued his sons with the pioneering spirit. Young Joseph's first clash with the savages took place when he was sixteen. His trading party became involved in the Battle of Bad Axe on the Wisconsin border. LaBarge's conduct under attack got him the clerk assignment on the *Yellowstone*.

Now, with the *Yellowstone* riding the flood-crested river, LaBarge's first concern was for the safety of ship and cargo. The Captain's written order was to take the ship on to Fort Union but that was now out of the question. Jupitor helped LaBarge into the pilot house. After test maneuvering with the equipment LaBarge managed to get the ship turned so it nosed downstream. Despite his head injury, he gripped the wheel and watched the river.

Jupitor, having had seafaring experience, assumed the duties of an acting officer. "If Indians learn of our fix," he remarked, "de ship and cargo is a goner."

LaBarge knew that. He had hope of floating the ship down river to some port where he could dock it, and await help from the Company. "Get the smoke stacks going," he urged Jupitor. "Make it look like we are under full steam."

However, they could not yet get under way—the mixed skeleton crew refused to function unless the dead bodies on board were disposed of, to minimize further plague threat. LaBarge acceded to their demands because he thought the point well taken. The bodies were cremated in the fire box, to make black smoke, and at last they were on their way.

The anchor was dropped in midstream for night stops. There was real risk in stopping to load the wood that had been piled on banks for them by roustabouts, for the return voyage. By day floating logs were snaked out of the river and cut up for fuel. What LaBarge feared most

Joseph LaBarge, who became a captain, received his pilot's license when he was only 19 years old.

was a mutiny brought on by Jupitor's slave-driving tactics.

And if their true plight became known the cargo would be quick loot to Indian pirates: even the three wounded men were placed on the upper deck and armed with rifles. When canoes paddled out from shore and Indians held up furs as a sign they wanted to trade, the deck guards opened fire to drive them away. To let the Indians learn the ship's situation would invite sure attack and capture. There was no help available. In 1833 the Dakota region had no trading posts, army camps, or white habitations.

Days later tension slackened as the wild region fell gradually behind them. At last, a whistle blast brought men off the Fort Atkinson bluff on the Iowa side, and LaBarge brought the *Yellowstone* alongside the levee.

When the traders there learned of their predicament, weapons were quickly leveled to prevent landings. The *Yellowstone* with its cholera threat had to move on. An Indian Agent shouted to LaBarge: "When you reach Missouri your ship and contaminated cargo will be burned. You men will rot in quarantine. That's the law."

Deep gloom settled on the drifting ship. Although there had been no new cases since the bodies were disposed of and the cabins scrubbed with lye water and fumigated with sulphur fumes, their optimism vanished. Upon reaching the Missouri area some of the men did not wait to be interrogated—they swam to shore to escape arrest. LaBarge himself decided to outwit the law in a bypass of St. Louis, in order to save his ship and cargo. He hugged the Illinois side and ran the *Yellowstone* aground on neutral soil.

As soon as he could—sweaty with relief to come to the end of the dreadful run—LaBarge reported to Pierre Chouteau. But nevertheless, he was arrested by the authorities and the ship and cargo were impounded! Then the American Fur Company exercised its influence and soon the *Yellowstone*, with a new captain and crew, which included LaBarge, headed back up the river to make deliveries to Fort Union.

During winter's freeze-down, LaBarge became acting trader at Cabana, a place which later was to become Omaha's landing site.

Four trips up the Missouri convinced LaBarge that the deep-riding side-wheelers were unsuited for the shallow river. The young clerk then went to work and designed a flat-bottomed boat with stern-wheel thrust that the Company built. This boat, the *Assiniboine*, pleased the Company with its test run but when she burned in 1835, with a $75,000 load of furs, the Company discharged LaBarge and returned to the fleet of floating Mackinaws that provided less hazards and cheaper transportation.

At nineteen Joseph LaBarge received his pilot license. As a pilot he could earn $1,200 a month during the navigable period. But he wanted to command his own ship. He now built another boat, slightly smaller, with flat bottom and rear paddle-wheel, that glided up the Missouri and even operated on the Yellowstone River. He made deliveries and pickups right in the fur harvesting field. Being an independent carrier, the Company built a like ship, *The Trapper*, to meet his competition. They also operated the *General Brooks*, the *St. Mary*, and the *Prairie Bird* on the Missouri.

A great stir of activity denoted progress in Dakota in the mid-1850's. Fort Pierre, a Chouteau trading post, became a military establishment. Fort Randall was built, and Indian agencies were located where they could be served by water

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shipments. Later came gold strikes in Idaho and Montana to boom the traffic.

By 1864 there were 47 steamers on the Missouri and by 1880 about 75. The fabulous mining operations in the mountains also stepped up the competition. Kingsbury's *History of Dakota* states that at that time ships showed a profit of from $17,000 to $50,000 in a season's operation. Consequently, many Mississippi River ships having palatial accommodations transferred to Missouri runs. The stateroom passenger fare was $300 one way. Freight was twelve cents a pound or $240 a ton. The highest point of navigation was Fort Benton, well above Fort Union. Ships raced to win valuable contracts. It was an exciting era on the great western rivers, and especially the Missouri.

During his career years Joseph LaBarge built fifteen ships and captained most of them himself. Above Fort Union the river narrowed into a winding, faster flowing channel. LaBarge built the *Chippewa* to maneuver such waters at top speed. In a race from St. Louis to Fort Benton and back, the *Chippewa* beat all competition and secured a 250-ton contract. His ship made the 6400 miles round trip in five months—considered good time.

LaBarge nailed a pair of huge elk horns on the pilot house, so all the captains would know who won that race. The next year the *Chippewa* was transporting cargo to Montana mines, including several tons of blasting powder, when the ship caught fire. In no time at all the blaze was out of control and the crew fled the vicinity—just before the *Chippewa* erupted into a mighty explosion.

Most of Montana's bonanza gold was transported down the river, one way or another. Cautious miners traveled by Mackinaw boats with hired guards to protect their wealth; others patronized the ship's deluxe services. This type of traffic attracted boat gamblers, confidence men, swindlers, thieves, and killers, which increased a Captain's weight of responsibility. Sometimes the Mackinaw traveler was robbed and murdered by the very guards he hired to protect his gold.

In 1867 Private Billy Berry, an American soldier, shot and killed Captain W.D. Spears, a touring British army officer, while both were on LaBarge's ship at Fort Buford. The crime had grave international repercussions. By the time the delayed case charging Berry with murder came to trial, Captain Joseph LaBarge, a witness, could not be located. He had left the river.

with $100,000 to invest, had proceeded overland to Virginia City to scout Montana mining prospects. From there he moved by coach to Salt Lake City where he became the house guest of Brigham Young. He and the church leader had met when LaBarge was ferrying Mormons across the Missouri at Florence, Nebraska. LaBarge could not be induced to settle in Utah, and soon proceeded east over the overland trail in a return to the river; he had found the river hard to wash out of his heart and life.

The deck of LaBarge's ship was a stage on which many history makers had played some small part. One tall, bearded passenger asked many questions about Indian conditions up the Missouri. Before they parted the witty, sad-eyed man asked the Captain would he buy him a good buffalo robe some time. LaBarge promised.

The tall stranger had served as President of the United States for three years before a delegation made up of Captain Joseph LaBarge, Dr. Walter A. Burleigh, of Yankton, D.T., and Charles E. Galpin, of the Indian Service, visited Washington to report on conditions in Dakota. LaBarge at that time delivered the long-promised buffalo robe and President Lincoln, draping it around his shoulders, expressed his pleasure with the gift.

The Civil War period multiplied the hazards of commerce on the Mississippi-Missouri waterway. LaBarge, a Unionist, had his ship fired on by raiders of both the North and the South in their forays for contraband and plunder. LaBarge's ship was armor-plated, and often was commandeered to transport men, horses, and supplies; and at times it served as a floating fort.

On one occasion the Gray army ordered LaBarge to take General Sterling Price down river to Lexington, Missouri, for medical attention. Upon LaBarge's return to Boonville, same state, he was taken prisoner and brought before General N. Lyons and accused of being a turncoat. General Price, expecting this might happen, had given LaBarge a signed letter stating that LaBarge had had no choice in the matter. This letter saved the Captain from a firing squad.

In the mid-1860's LaBarge transported a load of galvanized Yankees, as Confederate prisoners that volunteered for Indian fighting were called, up the Missouri to join General Alfred Sully's command. *Many of these volunteers deserted to become the miners and ranchers of Montana.*

LaBarge being an independent carrier remained an active rival of American Fur Company ships, and a challenger of other captains.

The first ships to reach Fort Benton in spring received the best fur and gold place between LaBarge's *Emilie* and the Company's *Shreveport*. Both ships were fast and both captains zealous to win. For days the ships remained within taunt-yelling distance of each other. Above where Bismarck is now situated the river was divided by a long island, and each ship took one of its channels, crowding on steam to gain distance. When they again sighted each other they were neck and neck and both pilots were aiming to center the main channel where the streams united. In closing the gap between them the Company pilot put rudder to port and banged the *Shreveport's* bow against the *Emilie's* hull, breaking her railing. Captain LaBarge countered by sticking a rifle out the window of his pilothouse and ordering the Company's pilot to back away or eat hot lead. The *Shreveport* edged aside. LaBarge gained distance in maneuvering the narrow channel above Fort Union and was first to reach Fort Benton.

In delivering annuity supplies to Indian Agencies the Company always underbid independent carriers. LaBarge claimed the Company could do this because they cheated the tribes. At landings they unloaded only part of an agency's shipment and had a crooked agency official sign the manifests covering the full order. The cargo thus stolen was resold to traders or unloaded at Company posts.

The Missouri-Kansas frontier was in turmoil during the war years. In 1861 LaBarge's ship was hired to move a large delegation from St. Joseph to Jefferson City, Missouri. In passing Kansas City the delegation uttered loud cheers for Jefferson Davis. LaBarge had no idea the members of the party were Confederates. The incident was wired to a rabid Unionist, Col. R.D. Anthony at Fort Leavensworth, who made plans to board LaBarge's ship when it put in on its return trip—and hang its Captain in a public execution.

LaBarge had intended to land at Leavensworth but upon spying an unruly crowd there, he continued without stopping.

In 1862 the Minnesota Uprising brought fleeing hostiles into Dakota where they merged with Sioux bands along the Missouri. While Sully's command tried to punish the hostiles the Territory's Indian Service was trying to restore order by good works and council meetings. The *Robert Campbell* with LaBarge as captain was sent upriver to scout the situation. On board ship was a peace commissioneer named Latta, and a squawman trade, Culberson; also a small military escort equipped with rifles and a small cannon.

Latta thought he could bribe the still rebellious chiefs into accepting agency security with gifts, but LaBarge and Cul-

ments unloaded for them on the river bank, it indicated that tension and hostilities still existed. Latta could not be convinced of it. He practically invited attack at Tobacco Garden, south of Fort Union.

Many Indians lined the bank here making friendly gestures, and the ship dropped anchor off-shore. Latta wanted to join the Indians for a council, but LaBarge said no. The alternative was to bring a Chief to the *Robert Campbell* and explain Latta's program. The Captain would not order men to go ashore, but six of the crew volunteered, and a boat was lowered. On ship LaBarge ordered the soldiers to take positions on deck with weapons at the ready, on the alert for any emergency.

Indians swarmed out onto the sandbar where the boat would beach. A befeathered chief advanced to meet the boat. One sailor stepped out to hold it beached, and as the chief was about to step into the boat he pulled a hidden knife from a sheath and plunged it into the sailor's back. The steersman prodded the boat from the sandbar and was killed with a lance. Arrows killed a third man in the retreating boat party. Soldiers firing from the ship were also finding targets.

The cannon scattered the crowd, but the deadly fight went on. While muskets were being reloaded shots from shore hampered the loading crew's safe return to ship. Boxes and cargo cases were piled up for a barricade, and canoe parties made daring attempts to distract defenders while swimmers tried to board the ship. The fight lasted about an hour. The Chief, mounted, rode up to the river bank in a gesture of bravado. Musket fire killed both him and the horse. The men on the ship succeeded in lifting the anchor and the *Robert Campbell* proceeded to Fort Benton.

The steamboating bonanza ended with the building of railroads that provided faster, year-round competition. After forty years on the river Captain Joseph LaBarge was obliged to retire.

He had married in 1842 and had a family home in St. Louis. Here he was to end his days. LaBarge was a history maker amongst history makers. He had known Jim Bridger, Father P.J. DeSmet, S.J., Kit Carson, the martyred brothers of the Saints' church, Joseph and Hyram Smith, fellow rivermen like Captain Grant, military figures such as Generals Grant, Lee Custer, and Fremont, and many others.

A tract of land he once owned is now LaBarge Avenue in St. Louis. From 1890 to 1894 LaBarge served as a city official. The river veteran died on April 2, 1899, at the age of 84, and was buried with church honors by his friends, the Jesuits at St. Louis. ●

KING OF THE WILD HORSE DESERT

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fered, consequently, telling losses.

Keeping up his traveling and promotion, Kinney attended an affair held at San Pedro Springs in San Antonio. The entire population of the city attended the "riding matches" on the prairie west of San Pedro Creek. It was a strange and novel scene with gaily dressed caballaros, rangers in buckskin shirts, leggins and slouched hats with pistols and bowie knives in their belts. On one side of the field were Comanche Warriors decked out in savage paint. Opposite were the rangers and a few ranchers with steeple crown sombreros, showy sashes and slashed trousers.

Astonishing equestrian feats were performed. There were shooting matches with bows and arrows and the riding of wild mustangs.

There were handsome prizes, pistols, bowie knives, Mexican blankets. First prize was won by Kinney's friend Ranger McMullen, second went to Long Quirt, a Comanche, third to H.L. Kinney and fourth to Senor Don Rafael, ranchero from the Rio Grande. Gifts of all kinds were presented to the Comanches.

While diplomats discussed the future of the Republic of Texas in Washington and Mexico City and Texans considered annexation to the United States, Henry Lawrence Kinney waged a pen-and-ink campaign to call attention to the land south of the Nueces River. At last he asked Washington through Major Andrew J. Donelson, United States envoy in Texas, for 400 men to settle conditions in the area between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande.

Gen. Zackary Taylor arrived with—not 400 men—but 4000 troops. Kinney's Trading Post was named Corpus Christi and Kinney's partner was the postmaster.

Now the cart trains and pack horses were few and far between but Kinney had the army trade, which was good.

For eight months the troops were encamped in Corpus Christi. When they left for Mexico, Kinney went with them, furnishing guides to the Rio Grande. With the Quartermaster's Corps, Kinney's fluency in Spanish and knowledge of the Mexican character was invaluable. He was cited for bravery during the Battle of Monterey and for personally delivering important papers.

After the Treaty of Gaudalupe was signed Kinney returned to Corpus Christi and his ruined trade. The troops were gone and the hangers-on, the gamblers, the camp women—to the amount of 2000. The place was desolate. Being a man of action Kinney did something in northern and eastern papers, glowing advertisements were placed describing Corpus Christi as the "Italy of America" and "The Naples of the Gulf." Literature was distributed by agents in Ireland, Scotland, England, the Isle of Wight—even in Germany. Extravagant claims were made. "Pears grow wild" was one statement although it was not explained that they were known as prickly pear apples.

Settlers arrived by the boatload. Most of them stayed. A few went on to better farming areas. Immigrants were sold 100 acres of land at one dollar per acre and each man was required to buy ten cows.

The 1950 census enumerated 710 persons in the town of Corpus Christi; 550 whites, 147 slaves, one free Negro, and 112 in an army detachment.

In 1849, no longer King of the Wild Horse Desert, Kinney was kingpin of a larger area. He was elected to the legislature to represent Nueces, Refugio, Cameron and Goliad Counties.

Also, in '49 news of the gold strike in California swept the Nation. Kinney saw this as another boom for his town. Again he inserted advertisements in the newspapers. They stated that the shortest and quickest route to the El Dorado was by boat to Corpus Christi and overland through San Antonio and El Paso.

Again the town was a bustling place. While the gold seekers landed with most of their supplies they lacked wagons and teams. Ranchers drove in mustangs. The streets echoed to the blacksmith's anvil and the rumbling of heavy wagons departing.

Before all the California bound travelers had departed Kinney had another idea. A good will merchandising trip was launched.

Kinney and Aubrey had dissolved their partnership some time during the Mexican War. Later Kinney teamed up with Gen. William L. Cazneau "to engage in business at Corpus Christi and on the Mexican Border for purchase and sale of merchandise for cash and produce."

The partners planned the goodwill trip with the help of Brigadier William Mann. Fifty wagons and carts loaded with merchandise had rendezvous at Casa Blanca thirty miles up the Nueces River. Some wagons were drawn by as many as twelve span of oxen. One hundred persons accompanied the wagons, teamsters, scouts, guides and many prominent men of the town. Most of the town journeyed to Casa Blanca to witness the train get underway.

A plow share was affixed to a wagon to mark a trail to the Rio Grande. This trail was followed by cart and pack trains

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