Lesson Five Primary Source

Callan, Louise. Philippine Duchesne: Frontier Missionary of the Sacred Heart. Maryland:Newman, 1957. Print.

Her letter of June 12 to St. Madeleine Sophie:

> …We have been told that the trip up the river is not dangerous and that the captain, who has already been informed about our passage, is a very trustworthy man. The steamboats operate under very strict regulations. The men's quarters are entirely separate from the women's, so during the entire trip we shall be able to have neither Mass and Communion nor confession. We do not know yet when we shall leave. Not a word from the Bishop. Travelers tell us we are much wanted in St. Louis, that we shall lack nothing, and that all success will be ours. We need an English-speaking postulant. One who wanted to join us here is too delicate.

Philippine Duchesne by Louise Callan RSCJ page 244

The *Franklin* pulled away from the landing and headed upstream as scheduled on July 12, with just fourteen passengers on board, but with a heavy lading in the hold. It was a new boat in its second season, and Captain Reed was flattered by the lively interest of the French nuns in everything he showed them. The machinery occupied almost the entire length of the first deck, leaving only a small space in the rear for "deck passengers." The domain of the cabin passengers was the second deck, where the ladies' parlor was well to the rear for the sake of safety in case of a boiler explosion. The pilot house and officers' quarters were on the top, or "hurricane," deck.

It was all novel and interesting, but it was a very expensive trip, costing perhaps five hundred dollars for the five nuns. When Mother Duchesne had tried to offer Mother St. Michel and her community a little gift in return for their cordial hospitality, the Ursulines would not hear of such a thing. Instead, they pressed on their departing guests another three hundred dollars to help defray the expense of the river trip. And through the decades that followed, their charity continued with a generosity that is beyond all counting.

The nuns had been assured that the river trip was not at all dangerous. But the fact that it took the *Franklin* forty days of navigation to reach St. Louis shows that perils abounded, for the Mississippi was so notoriously dangerous that travel by night was rarely attempted in the early decades of steamboating. Shallows and sand bars, planters and sawyers were practically everywhere and difficult to avoid. A snag could rip such a rent in the wooden hull that the boat would sink in a few minutes. In summer and autumn when the river was low, shifting sand bars changed the channel continually and built up hidden traps on which boats ran aground and listed perilously, if not disastrously. Spring floods, carrying great loads of debris from upstream, occasioned troubles of another kind.

There were man-made dangers, too, on the river trip. Mechanical inefficiencies abounded, for the steamboat was still in a trial-and-error stage. Faulty boilers sometimes burst under high pressure of steam. Wood used for fuel threw off showers of sparks that often set fire to the highly combustible boats. Crude sanitary conditions added danger to discomfort, for the steamboats became carriers of the dreaded epidemics that ravaged cities and towns along the

river for nearly a century. Mother Duchesne would experience the rougher side of river travel in the years to come, but both the *Franklin* and the Mississippi were on their good behavior during the summer of 1818.

From the time the boat was loosed from its moorings and headed out into the stream, the nuns were engrossed in the beauty of this new phase of their new world. Three of them had known the grandeur of Alpine country, the placid beauty of its high valleys, the clear current of its swift rivers that raced between narrow banks and were bridged by a span or two of arching. Here was a mighty expanse of mud-yellow water, so wide that its fearful swiftness was almost unperceived, yet holding unpredictable destruction in its treacherous current. Gulls soared or sailed overhead or skimmed the surface of the water. On either side, beyond the lavish tangle of rushes and sedges, stretched flat land without so much as a hill to break the monotonous vista to the horizon. As the *Franklin* moved up the great waterway, the nuns noticed how the dense growth on the shoreline was first a mingling of palm and willow and cane, then changed to brakes of cypress, live oak, and cottonwood. Here and there along the continually winding stream appeared wide plantations of corn and cane and flooded rice fields. Cattle grazed in the moist green meadows, but the grass, Mother Duchesne noted, was *not* so tall as to hide the animals from view. Now and then on the lower stretches of the river, substantial plantation houses could be seen, gleaming white or creamy yellow in the sunshine, with stately avenues of trees leading from the river landing to the pillared gallery, with sugar houses and slave quarters, stables and carriage houses scattered at no great distance from the big house.

In the swampy bayous, once a part of the river's channel, alligators floundered or swam or crawled about, and pelicans fished with awkward dignity. Tall, moss-draped cypress trees rose from swampy land sunk in brown ooze and formed an impenetrable forest wall. Sometimes the *Franklin* plowed along in their deep shade and the passengers found relief from the midsummer sun. Herons rose from the tangled thickets, startled by the splash of the paddle wheel that left a choppy white wake on the water. Swarms of mosquitoes attacked the passengers, and their stings were like sparks of fire, Mother Audé thought.

As the steamboat took its zigzag course up the highway of the valley, it stopped now on one shore, now on the other, to take on passengers or freight or fuel wood. At the Donaldsonville landing Father Benedict Richard came aboard with two seminarians, Evremond Harrissart, whom the nuns knew quite well, and Michael Portier. Heading upstream again, Captain Reed pointed out the entrance to Bayou Lafourche, a steady, languorous stream that had broken away from the river long ago and taken an independent course through rich lands that attracted early plantation settlement. Mother Duchesne and Mother Audé would know that bayou and Assumption Parish, through which it found its way to the gulf. Now it was only a name.

There was high ground on the shore to the east before the boat reached Baton Rouge. "*Baton Rouge?"* Once the domain of the Houma Indians, someone explained, and marked by the warning red stick.

When the river was lashed by summer storms, the angry waters were dark under the gray sky, but the *Franklin* rode them sturdily, and the nuns were unafraid, for they had weathered ocean storms far worse than those that struck the river in 1818. Fair weather meant oppressive heat, but sundown brought relief and the soft, still night, when a million stars hung low in the rich, dark sky above, or the golden moon rode behind the giant trees or shone in splendor on the rippling water, hiding its murkiness under a lustrous sheen. Then a mocking bird, perched high, would pour forth its sweet melody, and all else was still save the swish of disturbed waters.

In their diary the nuns kept an almost day-by-day account of incidents and accidents. Nineteen hours aground on a sand bank was worth noting, also a sudden halt and reversal of the boat, when a great drift of tree trunks and other water-logged debris barred the channel where the river had torn away a vast stretch of its eastern shore. A bread shortage gave a new topic for talk but caused little inconvenience, for there was plenty of corn meal on hand. At the frequent stops for refueling, the boat hands chopped in the forest while passengers hunted wild turkeys, ducks, and rabbits to add to the dinner menu. Sometimes they also brought back specimens of the rich vegetation that lined the shores, and the nuns were introduced to new varieties of plants-the lovely magnolia, the tulip tree, cypress, pawpaws, water lilies in delicate shades, and many other unknown in Dauphiny.

The high, green bluffs of Natchez came into view on July 17, and the *Franklin* drew in to the landing. During the day some drunken Indians on horseback rode down to the river bank, the men bedecked in native finery of skins and bright-hued feathers, the women wearing red calico and shining ornaments. The sight of them attracted and repelled Mother Duchesne, and she was relieved when they rode off, swaying and sagging on their mounts. In the sunset at Natchez the river was tawny gold, reflecting the glory of the horizon beyond the flat green of the western shore. As she gazed across the water at the crimson sky, Philippine did not suspect the agonies she would endure on that shore one day, nor the charity with which she would be received into one of the many beautiful homes that had already been built in and around Natchez.

The river was gradually narrowing as it led into the heart of the wilderness. The landscape was changing to gently rolling country, but it was not a gentle country they were heading toward. Here and there appeared a pioneer's clearing, a log cabin, a patch of cultivated ground. Further on, tilled fields, small orchards, and fenced pasture lands marked the outskirts of settlements and the industry of the pioneers. Early in August the *Franklin* passed the Arkansas border, and Missouri lay on the left bank. Mother Duchesne noted the course of the boat in her *Journal*: "We met with many accidents," she wrote, "because of snags and sandbars, but we saw other steamboats treated much worse than ours." After mentioning stops at several small river towns, she dwells at some length on Kaskaskia, where

> the boat was to remain for twenty-four hours, so the Religious of the Sacred Heart, knowing that a priest resided there, hoped to find an end to their long spiritual privation… They were disappointed in their hope, for the pastor was just leaving and took Father Richard with him. But a half-civilized Indian chief of the Illinois tribe came to the river bank with his wife and many followers.

On August 19 the boat stopped at Ste Genevieve and the pastor, Father Henri Pratte, came to see the religious. Mother Duchesne was so impressed by this young priest and all he told her about the town and its people, that when she found herself in what seemed to be a situation impossible of acceptance in St. Louis, her thoughts turned eagerly to Father Pratte and his parish, but she was not allowed to found her first convent in that fervent Catholic community.

The long river trip was drawing to a close. As the limestone cliffs grew higher along the west shore the travelers strained to catch a glimpse of the spreading group of houses that was the town.

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